

Who You Want To Be

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Who You Want To Be

by [skylightsparkle](#)

Summary

Everyone knows the story of the hero's journey to save the world, but no one talks about what comes after. /A short, introspective series that follows the characters from When The World Ends learning how to cope with a 'new' world, and discovering where they fit in it./
Rating for mentions and portrayals of PTSD and various other mental and physical issues.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

Max

Max didn't like the room that they were in. He was staring at the cheerful blue walls that he supposed were meant to be soothing, but it was just annoying him. Maybe it was the fact that there were no pictures or anything. The room was clearly thrown together very quickly, with a desk, a chair, and two couches separated by a small table.

He was sitting on one couch, a middle-aged man with a receding hairline and glasses was sitting on the one opposite him. He had a clipboard in front of him, a pen pressed to it. Maybe that was what threw Max off so much.

"Welcome, Max. My name is Dr. Jones. I'm going to be working with you until we both feel like you don't need to visit me anymore." He smiled warmly, brown eyes positively twinkling.

"You work for the Pokémon League, right?" Max said, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose slightly.

This seemed to startle Dr. Jones a bit. "What makes you say that?" Max stared at him and he sighed. "Yes. I do. You seem suspicious."

"Well, the Pokémon League did lie about the part they played in saving the world," the young boy pointed out.

Dr. Jones sighed and said, "I suppose they did. Tell me about that. About anything you think or feel about what happened. Any topic you would like to breach."

Max let his lips curl and narrowed his eyes slightly before looking away and shrugging his shoulders. "What's to say? I was in a G-Men base for nearly the entire thing."

"Alright, let's start there. What was that like?"

Tilting his head slightly, Max thought for a moment. He weighed his options, knowing that it would be good to share his thoughts, but also not wanting to talk to someone from the Pokémon League. It was a matter of pride, which he quickly realized was stupid.

"It was...frustrating. I wanted to help, but they treated me like a little kid the whole time." Max shook his head. "I know I'm young, but I have friends that faced worse at my age." Realizing what he said, Max sped up his speech. "I mean, I know I'm different from my older friends, I get that, but still!"

"You feel like someone else wouldn't have been held back?" Dr. Jones offered.

Max looked at him thoughtfully, and slowly nodded his head.

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Excitement practically crackled in the air, and it was positively contagious. Max found himself sitting on the edge of his seat, despite the fact that the battle below hadn't started yet.

Though he had watched many different League Tournaments on television, had seen a few live, and had participated in one himself, it was still a thrill to be sitting amongst the spectators at the Indigo Plateau. There was something about being in the birth place of the Pokémon League that added to the mystic of the place to Max. This was where it had all began.

It was the first of the League Tournaments that year. After months of rebuilding and hard work, it was nice for everyone to kick back and be entertained. Max had to give it to Red, Lance, and everyone else, they made the right choice to go ahead with the tournament.

He just didn't agree with anything else that they did.

"There he is!" Bonnie grabbed his shoulder and shook it excitedly, almost knocking Max's glasses off in the process. She pointed with her free hand, nearly hitting her brother in the face, as she pointed across the grassy arena.

Max straightened his glasses and leaned forward, grinning as he saw Ash walk out onto one of the trainer stands, a rather young trainer walking onto the other one. The boy, who had to be around Max's age, stared at Ash before a determined expression danced across his face. Max smiled slightly and shook his head. "That kid has no idea what's about to happen."

"Did Ash say what Pokémon he was using?" May asked eagerly as she leaned forward, blue eyes darting from one end of the field to the other.

"It won't matter," Max said objectively. "Not only is it a three-on-three battle, and on a grass field, but Ash has years more experience. He probably won't even need to switch Pokémon once." He knew Ash's battling style, and while Ash's choices of Pokémon were normally pretty easy to predict, his battle tactics were anything but.

"Welcome to this first round match of the Indigo Plateau Conference! This battle is between the green trainer, Ryan Davison of Saffron City, and the red trainer, Ash Ketchum of Pallet Town!" Max noted that more people seemed to be cheering for Ash, but that didn't really surprise him. Ash made friends all over the world, after all.

He also noticed the way Ash's face twitch when he was called 'the red trainer' and knew exactly what that meant. Pikachu seemed to as well, since he patted Ash's cheek encouragingly.

"This is a three-on-three match on the grass arena! If your Pokémon is unable to battle, or refuses to, the battle goes to your opponent. You cannot recall a Pokémon once it has been removed from the field. Do the trainers understand the rules?" Both Ash and Ryan nodded. "Trainers, select your first Pokémon!"

The staggering difference between the two Pokémon almost made Max laugh. Ryan's Poliwrath was obviously well-trained, judging from its size and shine. Misty positively swooned over it a couple seats away from him. Ash's Bulbasaur, on the other hand, was rather small and unassuming.

Judging from the cocky smile on Ryan's face, Max realized that he was making his first error: assuming that an unevolved Pokémon was weak. From the look on Ash's face, he seemed to realize this as well.

"He's going to destroy him," Brock said from somewhere behind Max.

He couldn't agree more.

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"Isn't this really cute, Drew?"

Max groaned internally, and looked up as his sister bounced towards the green-haired trainer. Drew looked up from where he was sweeping, raising an eyebrow at the plush Ralts in her hands. Max got the distinct feeling that he was wondering why May wasn't helping clean up the gym like

the rest of them were. It was on his mind too.

Drew visibly rolled his eyes. "Aren't you supposed to be helping?"

Max eyed the two of them curiously, watching as May shoved the plush into Drew's face. He scowled at her and batted it away, and started to wobble a bit. A grimace flashed across his features, and May dropped the plush, putting her hands on his shoulders as a worried expression appeared on her face.

She muttered something Max couldn't hear, but Drew just shook his head and took a step back. "I'm fine."

"Drew I—"

"I'm fine!" he snapped harshly, and a heavy silence filled the room. He groaned and blew a strand of his green hair out of his eyes. "Just...I'm going to keep sweeping, alright? Put the plush with my stuff. My cousin, Wally, might like it."

"Oh! That's right!" May's eyes lit up. "He's the little one with the green hair, right?" Max had the urge to point out that she just described Drew too, but he didn't want to interrupt the moment. May picked it up and then looked directly at Drew, her smile fading slightly. "Are you sure you'll be okay?"

"Yeah. Just a small spasm," Drew said dismissively and waved her off. Her eyebrows pinched a bit at that, and Max recognized that look as the one she gave him when she was annoyed with him.

"A small spasm," May repeated sarcastically. She grabbed his hand and tugged slightly. "You know you're supposed to sit down if that happens, not say, 'oh I'm Drew and I spew stubbornness for fun so I'm not going to listen to the doctors and sit down when I'm supposed to!' And don't you deny it! You are going to sit down even if I have to carry you myself."

Max stared at his older sister in awe. In a way, it was like watching a younger version of his parents, and that was a startling thought in and of itself.

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"Beedrill is unable to battle...the battle goes to Emboar!"

Max watched as Ash's opponent, Ryan, visibly gritted his teeth, his face red and his frustration obvious. He could understand. It was frustrating to train hard, only to know that you were going to get knocked out in the first round. Ash and his Pokémon made everything look so effortless that it was almost unfair.

The first rounds of a tournament often were. That's why it was so impressive when some of the younger trainers pushed through. They were both talented, and incredibly lucky not to come up against the wrong person.

Originally, he had thought about participating in the League himself, but Max quickly realized that he wasn't really cut out for this right now.

He wasn't sure if he'd ever be cut out for the competitive scene again.

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"Max!"

He blinked open his eyes and looked down, realizing that he was holding his Kirlia beneath his body. Slowly, he turned his head, and flinched away when he came face-to-face with Sceptile's glowing Leaf Blade hovering less than a foot away from him. A barrier that he could only see because its power pulsed against the Pokémon's attack was the only thing that stopped it.

For his part, Sceptile looked horrified as he quickly backed away.

"Li!" Kirlia growled angrily and poked at him.

"Are you okay?"

Max quickly pushed himself up and looked around wildly, coming face to face with Ash, his eyes wide with fear.

"What was that?" Ash asked, and Max was a bit surprised by the angry edge to his voice.

"I—I'm so—" His voice cracked embarrassingly. "I'm sorry." His memory caught up to his actions. He and Ash were having the friendly, practice battle that had been promised to him a long time ago. It was the first battle that he had since the Tree of Beginning. He had seen Sceptile coming at Kirlia, and the size and strength difference had made him panic.

Then Max didn't actually remember what he did. He could surmise from his position that he had thrown himself over his Pokémon to protect her without even realizing what he was doing. That's when it occurred to him why Ash was angry. He had thrown himself into danger when there had been no actual danger in the first place.

The anger evaporated from Ash's face and he slowly started to reach out, only to stop. Max's eyes looked down, and he blinked with surprise when he saw how badly Ash's hand was shaking.

Ash pulled his hand back, clenching it into a fist. "Don't do that again. Sceptile could have—I almost—if I would have put up that shield...Kirlia was okay! Sceptile wasn't going to hurt her."

"Kirlia kirl," his Pokémon spoke up in agreement. Sceptile nodded his head.

"I know, I'm sorry." Shame rushed through Max. "I just...I just panicked."

Ash made a sound that Max couldn't really decipher. It sounded like an attempt at a laugh, but it was also like a choking sob that he was trying to keep down.

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"Am I a failure?"

Doctor Jones looked up at Max with curious eyes. The young boy flushed with embarrassment at the question and looked at the floor.

"I have no reason to think you're a failure, Max," the man answered, his tone sincere. "Do you think you are?"

He picked a bit at the edge of the couch. "Maybe."

"You're only twelve. Why would you think that?"

"When...when my friend was my age he was already making a name for himself," Max explained slowly, trying to piece together everything in his mind. "And me...I wanted to be a competitive battler. I wanted to be able to take over my father's gym when I'm older...but..." His hands ghosted

over the pokeball's on his belt, and he felt shame rush through him. He knew by now that Doctor Jones was going to wait for him to get his thoughts together, something Max highly appreciated. "I haven't been able to get through an entire battle without panicking."

"You were in a highly traumatic situation at a very young age," Doctor Jones told him, his voice kind and reassuring. "How you respond to that may be very different from others in the same scenarios. Your thoughts and fears are entirely valid."

"Doesn't feel like it. Others went through worse."

"Suffering isn't a competition," Jones reminded him softly, something he had pointed out during various visits. "Have you talked to your Pokémon about your fears?"

Max hesitated. "No. Maybe I should, right?"

The psychologist nodded eagerly. "They are your friends, your companions. Should the occasion arise where you don't want to battle competitively anymore, they will understand."

"I...I know they will." Max's shoulders slumped. "I just...don't know what I want to do with myself anymore."

"I know many trainers that leave home when they're ten feel like they need to know exactly what they're going to do with their lives, but consider the fact that you are only twelve. The majority of kids your age are still struggling through homework." Max looked up at that. "You are not a failure, you still have plenty of time to figure out who you want to be."

Max nodded his head slowly. He understood the words perfectly, but accepting them was something else all together.

"You don't have to accept all this right now," Dr. Jones assured him when Max voiced his thoughts. "But I do want you to try and think those words every day."

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"Dugtrio is unable to battle! The match goes to Ash Ketchum!"

The cheers that went up in the stands was ridiculous. Sure, some of it was just for a good battle, but Max was reminded again just how many lives Ash had touched since he was ten. It was awe inspiring and made him a little resentful.

"I am not a failure," he muttered under his breath so that no one could hear him. "I still have plenty of time to figure out who I want to be." He looked up, watching as Ash pet his Samurott, before walking towards his opponent.

Ryan was glaring at the ground, and looked startled when Ash spoke to him. Max doubted anyone could hear what Ash was saying, but Ryan went from frowning, to surprised, to having a small smile on his face. Then they shook hands, and the cheering in the stands got louder.

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"Are you sure this is what you want to do, sweetie?" Caroline asked Max as she watched him zip up his backpack. "You don't want to stay here for a little while longer?"

"I'm sure," he said with a nod of his head. "I think I'm going a bit stir-crazy here."

"I suppose so," his mother agreed, walking over and running her hands through his hair. "Goodness, your hair is getting long. Do you want me to cut it before you go?"

He huffed with annoyance and gently shoved her hand away. "I like it how it is."

"Leave the boy be, Caroline," Norman said as he came in the room, laughter tinting his voice. "He's not a baby anymore."

"He's my baby."

"Mom," Max groaned, his cheeks turning pink.

"I know, I know." She sighed and stared at him with sad, lavender eyes. "It's hard to believe you're growing up and going on your own adventures. I just wish you'd stay closer to home."

"Kalos wasn't even involved with Team Rocket's takeover," he pointed out. "It's safe. Besides, I won't be alone. I'm traveling with Bonnie. Plus Clemont and Serena will be around too." Caroline was still frowning, not looking very convinced.

"Are you sure you don't want to wait for a little while longer?"

"I'm sure," he insisted, staring up at her with determined brown eyes. "I need to do this mom. I need to...figure out what I want to do with myself."

Caroline sighed and smiled warmly at him. "If this is what you think you need to do, your father and I will support you every step of the way."

Max smiled at both of his parents. "Thanks mom, dad."

He was sure that he not only wanted to go to Kalos, but he had to.

...

Staring up at the zeppelin in front of him, Max suddenly felt sick. This was different than going to Johto or around Hoenn. Kalos was so much farther away. Not even Ash went that far until he was older.

He bit his lip nervously, not wanting to look back at his parents. Then he'd probably cry and stay home, and he also didn't want to do that.

"Max!"

Jumping, he looked around to see May running towards him. She skidded to a stop in front of him, her red sweater falling off one of her arms.

"May! I thought you were in LaRousse!" Max shifted his bag on his shoulders and looked at her with confusion.

She caught her breath and looked up, fixing her sweater as she did. May crossed her arms and stared at him sternly. "You're going all the way to Kalos! Of course I'm going to say goodbye." She huffed. "Brothers, honestly."

Max glared at her slightly, but the glare vanished as quickly as it came, his shoulder slumping slightly.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing." She glared at him. "Okay...well maybe..."

May's expression softened a bit and she sighed. "You're nervous, aren't you? That's okay, you know. You won't be on your own."

"I know that," Max assured her, and shrugged. "I don't know what it is. I didn't want to bring it up around mom because she'd probably just keep me here."

"You don't have to go if you don't want to. It's not too late to change your mind. No one will think less of you," she said, purposely making sure that their parents couldn't see her expression. This was something Max appreciated greatly.

He thought for a moment before shaking his head. "No. I feel like...I need to do this. I need to go somewhere else for a little while."

"Then go." May waved towards the zeppelin. "Be afraid, but have fun."

"Aren't you supposed to tell me to not be afraid?"

May just grinned at him, and suddenly swooped down to hug him. Max squeaked and struggled a little bit. "May!"

"You'll be okay. Good luck and have fun!" She stood back up and shoved him gently towards the zeppelin.

He took a deep breath and nodded his head. Slowly he walked towards the stairs, climbing them nervously.

"Max!"

He looked around at his sister, who was now standing with their parents and waving at him. May laughed as she waved. "Don't forget to get me a present!"

The young boy stared at her for a moment before laughing and waving back. He shook his head and walked inside. He was still nervous, but he was also excited too. He was going off to a distant land to have his own adventures with known friends, and hopefully he would make some new ones.



Tracey

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Alright, let's take a look at that arm of yours."

Tracey tried to keep a straight face as he raised his left arm up, but he couldn't hide the grimace as pain rushed through the stiff limb. The doctor narrowed her eyes slightly, but said nothing to that, which he was grateful for.

As her silver eyes danced across his arm, Tracey felt the urge to grab his white over-shirt and put that back on, but refrained. She was just doing her job, helping an injured person.

He looked down and almost grimaced again at the patchy skin that was pale in some spots, dark in others, and his own tanned colour in other places still. He swallowed to keep from throwing up, and looked towards the ceiling. How anyone could look at it was beyond him.

"Your skin is coming along quite nicely," the doctor noted. Tracey doubted this, but decided not to argue with her. "Tell me, how does it feel?"

"Stiff and sore," he admitted, "but also numb at times, does that make sense?"

"Absolutely. You probably suffer from more sensitivity to coldness as well, right?" she asked.

Blinking with a bit of surprise, Tracey nodded his head. "Yeah. I've noticed it a few times." Surprising even himself, he let out a short laugh. "I used to hate wearing long-sleeved shirts but..." He nodded towards his white shirt.

She nodded her head, before frowning a bit as she regarded her charts. "I am a bit worried about your weight. Your new results indicate quite a large drop in muscle mass."

Tracey felt warmth rush across his cheeks, but not in a good way. It was a bitter twist of embarrassment.

His shoulders slumped slightly and he said, "I know."

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Sand flew up into the air, causing Tracey to block his eyes. Beside him, Gary coughed a bit and waved his hand in front of his face. Gary took his glasses off, looking at them ruefully and putting them in his pocket, clearly deciding it wasn't worth it to keep them on. "I thought this was a rock field."

Tracey chuckled a little at that. "It used to be, but it was so damaged that they decided just to keep it as is." He nodded towards Ash's Tauros that was out battling a Steelix of all things. "It's why that person is underestimating Ash." His brown eyes shot towards the screens above them looking from Ash's name to his competitor's. "Sidney."

Gary narrowed his eyes slightly before asking, "So is this Sidney person a boy or a girl?"

Tracey shrugged his shoulder, because it was impossible to tell and it didn't particularly matter. He grimaced a bit, reaching up and rubbing his arm.

Instantly, Gary's attention shifted from the battle back to him, worry painting his features. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah." He slowly nodded his head. "Everything's just fine."

The green-eyed boy stared at him unsurely before trying to rotate his arm in a circle, but grimacing as it locked. "It's not the exact same, but I get it."

Tracey blinked, staring at Gary's arm. He had forgotten that Gary was stabbed in the arm with a metal slab, and hadn't recovered complete movement in it. It was different, but still the same.

His eyes trailed from one person to the next. Clemont still had a limp from his healing leg. Drew would need some sort of aid to help him walk for the rest of his life. The skin on Dawn's hands was completely disfigured. Misty had a scar from a gunshot wound that should have killed her. Then there were the scars that they couldn't see.

He suddenly felt a little selfish. He wasn't the only person that had lost something.

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Tracey slowly twisted the screwdriver in his hand towards the right until the screw was securely in the pipes. He tilted his head slightly and nodded, looking over his shoulder the best he could in the narrow cupboard. "Turn it on."

"You sure?"

"Yeah." He heard the tap of the sink twist, followed by the sound of rushing water. Tracey braced himself in case any of it shot out of the pipes, and breathed a sigh of relief when he realized that everything was working as it should be.

Tracey pushed himself out from under the cupboard, and grimaced a bit as he twisted himself the wrong way, slipping to the cold surface of the linoleum floor rather than sitting up like he had intended to be.

"That's one more thing fixed." He looked up at Daisy in time to see her force the worried expression off her face, instead clapping her hands together. "You're a life saver, helping us with this place."

Breathing a mental sigh of relief, he forced himself to sit up and shrugged. "You guys just got this new place and you're waiting on the rest of the gym to be finished. No point paying to fix small things like this too, right?" Their old gym was in the middle of being torn down, even though the new one was only half finished. Though the structure itself was still there, the pools and all the specific designs on the inside needed to be finished. At least the large living area was done, and it looked much nicer than before.

"Yeah..." Daisy trailed off, her sea-green eyes suddenly losing focus, like she was lost in a dream.

"Daisy?"

"Huh?" Her head snapped back towards him, before she laughed. "Silly me, sorry." She held out her hand to him.

That wasn't at all what he wanted, but Tracey decided to go with it. He grabbed her hand, and allowed her to help him up with a surprising amount of strength that no one realized she had.

"What's wrong?" he asked her curiously.

"Oh, well," Daisy tapped her fingers together lightly before she moved to another part of the room, where she picked a water-warped photo off of the counter. Tracey followed her and looked down at the picture. On it were three very young girls he recognized as Daisy, Violet, and Lily, a tall man with blue hair and sea-green eyes hugging all three of them close. Beside them was a woman with pink hair and brown eyes holding a tiny baby that Tracey realized was Misty.

It took Tracey a moment to realize that these were her parents. "You look like your mom."

She laughed a bit at that. "I've heard that before. With my grandfather's hair from my mom's side and my dad's eyes. Misty gets her hair from our grandmother on our dad's side...so did our Aunt Misty." She frowned. "All the old pictures are gone. From when dad was young. Of Aunt Misty. Of our grandparents when they were young."

"I'm sorry," he said honestly as he stared at the picture. "You do still have this one though, so that's good. I don't remember ever seeing a picture of them."

"That was my fault," Daisy admitted. "After grandma died, I hid them all because I didn't want to see them. They died so long ago, but it still hurt." She shook her head, blonde waves bobbing in the ponytail that was high on her head. "I was the one who put all the pictures in the basement and now they're gone." She motioned out the window to where the old gym was being torn down. "Soon all this will be gone too."

"Daisy..."

She walked by him and put her hand on the counter. "I resented that place when I was younger. Hated that it had to be a gym...that it kept me here. Then I selfishly forced Misty to come back. She made it work, and then I did too because it wasn't as bad as I thought. It was dad's gym. It was grandma's. It was her father's. His father's. It was our aunt's gym. Now it's just going to be ripped down." Daisy faced him, smiling weakly, tears shining in her eyes. "I wish I had more time with it, as stupid as that sounds."

"It's not stupid." Tracey put her hands on her upper arms. "Not at all." He couldn't understand what losing something like this would mean to her on a personal level, but he did understand that it was very upsetting to her.

"You know what?" She looked up at him. "We should go to the Orange Islands for a week or so before they expect the gym to open up again. I know Misty's going to go off with Ash for a little while too. We should go visit your parents."

Tracey's cheeks turned pink. His parents had been asking him to stop by and to bring 'that beautiful blonde' with him. "They'd really like that." He really should visit home more often, but it wasn't exactly easy to get there.

His eyes slid over to the warped family photo. No, it didn't matter how difficult it was to get there, he'd definitely visit and call home more often. After all, he was lucky to still have both of his parents and his childhood home still intact.

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There was something incredibly soothing about running a pencil along a new sheet of paper. From the light lines sketching out the initial shapes and details, to the darker lines and shading that gave it life. Tracey had almost forgotten why he loved to draw in the first place. It wasn't just to

document the Pokémon he had seen. It would be far more practical to use a camera.

He finished the last of his shading and looked at the finished product with pride, once again glad that his injured arm wasn't his dominant one.

"That's a beautiful picture. Would you mind if I had a closer look?"

Tracey smiled at the man sitting across from him. "Of course you can." He handed over his sketchbook. "You can look through everything in there, I don't mind."

"Thank you." The man flipped through a few pages and stopped. "Now, who's this beauty?"

Knowing which page he was on, a soft smile appeared on Tracey's face. "Daisy."

"Ah yes, your girlfriend." The therapist leaned forward slightly. "How are things since our last session?"

Tracey's cheeks started to burn. "Good, I guess. I didn't get a ring yet though."

"That's alright, there's time."

There might not always be time though, Tracey knew that. That was part of the problem. Some other crisis could already be brewing without their knowledge.

"Tracey?"

He blinked and realized that his hand had curled into a fist around his pencil, snapping it in two. He let go of the pieces and stared at the therapist sheepishly. "Sorry. I'll get you another one."

"No, that's quite alright. There are plenty here." The doctor motioned back to his desk. "Where did you go?"

"I just..." Tracey shrugged before motioning to his sketchbook. "Things are so simple when I sketch. They were when I started out too. I watched to see rare Pokémon and help Professor Oak. Now I just...miss life without the drama I guess. Without worrying if it will happen again."

"We all worry about that. Never feel like you're alone in that," the man assured him. "And that's completely understandable. There's nothing wrong with wanting something simple. Not everyone needs to dream 'big.'" He flexed his fingers in the air as he said the word big. "Even something that can seem simple and small to one person can be a grand achievement to another if it's what they want. It could be being a great researcher. It could be catching a glimpse of a rare Pokémon. It could be becoming a famous artist. It could be asking a woman to marry you." He leaned forward slightly. "You can be whoever you want to be, Tracey. It's entirely up to you."

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Hopelessness filled Tracey as his brown eyes darted from one sparkling object to the next. This was the tenth store he looked at in the third city he looked in and he still hadn't found exactly what he was looking for.

"Well, what about this one?" He looked over at Brock, who pointed at a ring with a silver band.

"No. It's gotta be gold."

"You couldn't have mentioned that to begin with? That cuts down a lot." Brock didn't mean to sound annoyed, but they had been all over Pewter City that day in every jewelry store.

Tracey knew this, so he let it go. "Sorry, I'm just...nervous."

"That makes sense. This is Daisy Waterflower you're going to ask to marry you. That has to be intimidating," Brock agreed. He had been more than happy to help out his friend when he asked. Shopping for engagement rings was certainly an eye-opening experience, since he hadn't even thought about it yet (for obvious reasons), and he hadn't actually seen just how much thought went into it. "Maybe you should just let her pick."

Tracey rolled his eyes. "That would actually be a good idea with some people, but like you said, this is Daisy Waterflower."

"Right. She probably expects a fancy dinner and everything."

"She's been hinting at it enough."

Brock snorted with amusement and said, "I've heard. It's driving Misty crazy. She's been ranting about it over texts for the past few days. I don't think you're as subtle as you think you are."

"That's why it *has* to be the perfect ring," Tracey insisted. "My parents helped me out so I've got a pretty decent budget but that just makes it even harder..."

His brown eyes locked onto something just behind Brock. He moved closer, staring at the golden ring with a princess cut diamond in the middle, smaller diamonds dotting the band. "This one. This is the one."

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"Daisy—I—I just—ugh." Tracey smacked his head against the desk. "Shoot me, Misty."

The young woman in question looked up at him with little interest. "If you try to ask her that way, she'll do it for you."

"You are zero help," he deadpanned. "You said that you'd help me figure out what to say to your sister."

"Well, yeah," she tapped the pen in her hand against the notebook where she was looking over a list of things they had to do in the new gym. "But you have to come up with something first before I can shoot it down."

"Try to be more helpful. Please."

Misty rolled her eyes and got up. She put her hands on her hips and stood before him. "Okay, forget writing. Just practice with me. Pretend I'm Daisy and just talk."

"I don't know..."

"Do it."

Tracey sighed and turned on the chair. "Daisy I—"

"No. Get down on one knee. She'll expect it," Misty demanded.

He once again signed before all but flopping to the floor and holding out the engagement ring, "Daisy, will you—"

"Hey Mist, I—" Ash stopped, one foot in the door, brown eyes looking from Tracey, to Misty, and

back again. He raised an eyebrow and tilted his head slightly.

"Ash!" the young man yelped and jumped to his feet. "It's not what it looks like."

"Eh, better you than me." He stepped sideways and grinned as the pen Misty had been holding sailed through the air where he had just been standing.

"You jerk. I'm going to say no when you ask," she said, glaring at him, though there wasn't really any anger behind it.

"You mean I don't have to spend a ton of money on a dumb ring? Bonus!"

"Oh my Arceus," Misty groaned and looked at Tracey, who stared at them with confusion. "Don't do what he does and you'll be good."

Ash tossed his arm over Misty's shoulder. "That's not true. I could probably throw a ring at you and you'd be good." She rolled her eyes at him and muttered something that sounded like 'you better not,' but Ash ignored her, looking at Tracey instead. "You *know* Daisy better than anyone. You know what she'd want to hear, and besides, she's not *that* snobbish anymore. You'll be okay."

Somehow, hearing those words made Tracey's spirit rise. "You know what, you're right! I—" He cut himself off and his eyes went wide. "I actually have a great idea. Thanks Ash!"

He hurried out the door, hearing Misty mutter, "When did you get here, anyway?"

...

"There," Tracey said as he clicked shut the last suitcase, filled with various papers and sketchbooks. "Finished." All he had to do was put it in the car he had rented, and then make his way back to Cerulean City.

"Already?" He looked up at Professor Oak's voice, watching as the old man came into the room and looked around almost wistfully. "You've been helping me for so long, I'll be sad to see you go, but I understand."

"You'll be able to find a new assistant in no time, Professor," Tracey answered, though not without a twinge of guilt. "I just...this isn't because of you. You were an amazing mentor and I will cherish the time I spent here!"

"Perhaps I'll find another assistant, but they won't be you. You, my boy, are irreplaceable," Professor Oak said with a nod of his head and a smile. "Which is why I'm proud of you for moving on with something you really want to do. If there's anything you ever need, never hesitate to ask."

Tracey smiled warmly at his mentor. "Thank you, Professor. If you ever need anything too, if you need a hand for a special event or anything, you can always ask me. I'd like to stay in touch."

"Of course!" Professor Oak nodded once again. "I couldn't picture it any other way. Now, I imagine you want to get on the road before dark. Where is that grandson of mine to help you move all this?"

"Being a lazy lump!" They both jumped as Leaf seemed to materialize out of nowhere, coming through the door. "So you've got me instead!"

With the help of Leaf and Professor Oak, Tracey had the car packed up fairly quickly. As he closed the trunk, he looked around at the place he had called home for the past few years. He would

cherish the time he had in this place until the very end, but it was time to move on.

"You know," Leaf said as they walked back inside so that Tracey could grab his backpack that he left on the couch so that he could balance his boxes. "I'm going to miss having you around here."

"Oh?" He had worked with her before, and sure, they talked, but Tracey never thought he was particularly close to Leaf.

"Yeah. You were a breath of sanity here. Now you're leaving me with Gary and Ash." She paused. "And we're probably going to get Misty eventually too. There will never be a sane moment here again."

Tracey laughed at her and shook his head. "No, probably not."

"Leaf, dear, could you come and help me with the computer?" Professor Oak's voice rang out.

"How about you leave the computer alone and come say goodbye to Tracey," Leaf called back, appearing almost panicked as she rushed out of the room. He couldn't blame her. When Professor Oak tried to fix computers, he tended to make them worse.

The elderly man walked into the room instead. He smiled again and nodded towards the door. "I guess this is it."

"Yeah. Again, thank you for everything, Professor," Tracey agreed as he tossed his bag over his shoulder and approached the door. He stopped when he noticed a new frame on the wall just beside the door, a simple drawing of a Pikachu and a Celebi on it.

"That picture has always been important to me," Professor Oak stated. "It was getting far too faint, so I put it in a frame. It seemed appropriate."

"I saw this before," Tracey admitted, "I was always curious. When did you meet a Celebi?"

Professor Oak laughed merrily. "Let's just say we've all had our fair share of wild adventures."

Tracey decided to let it go and nodded his head. "Well, I've had enough of them."

"That's not entirely true," Professor Oak noted. "Adventures come in many different forms. You're just starting a new one that will be just as exciting and scary as running after legendary Pokémon can be."

Tracey thought about that for a moment, before smiling again. He really liked the sound of that.

...

Cheers erupted from the stands as the dust cleared, Ash's Serperior tilting her head into the air victoriously as Sidney's Dunsparce fainted.

Tracey whooped loudly, excited for his friend. Beside him, even louder than he was, Daisy cheered for the trainer that would be moving on to the next round.

He couldn't help but grin as the light bounced off of a diamond and gold ring.



Chapter End Notes

A few things to clarify: I mentioned last time that chronology in this is, for the most part, shot. You can probably see one thing that keeps moving steadily forward now from the last chapter to this one. Everything else is purposely all over the place. I'm experimenting with writing, because you never learn or get better if you don't challenge yourself.

Also this is in fact a direct sequel to WTWE. It's just something completely different. As I explained to a few people, what can you possibly do that's bigger and more harrowing than the end of the world without it becoming too cheesy or eye-roll inducing? Reality is, you don't. You bring it closer to home and make it more personal. This story is about their personal battles.

Another thing, there is no rhyme or rhythm to the chapter lengths. At all. It's completely random. Some are super short. Some are super long. There are 14 chapters. You have Max and Tracey. The other ones are Ash, Misty, Brock, May, Dawn, Iris, Cilan, Serena, Clemont, Bonnie, Gary and Leaf. I'll leave the order a surprise, but the last one should be obvious.

And finally, thank you to EchidnaPower, who managed to work through his busy schedule to help me out. You're awesome!

Til next time,

Written by: Skylight Sparkle

Edited by: EchidnaPower

Bonnie

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Blue eyes turned towards the sky as she tilted her head back to look up the looming tower before her. It had felt like ages since she had been home, but that wasn't quite right. It had only been a few months.

It was so strange being back home. It felt completely safe, like nothing had changed at all.

"Bonnie, come on."

"Denne Denne!"

Bonnie broke out of her thoughts, blinked several times, before rushing towards the door after her father and brother. She looked around as the familiar faces that worked in the Prism Tower gift shop waved to them. Nothing had changed for them at all. The world had almost ended, but the people here seemed almost oblivious to that fact.

It was more than a little strange to Bonnie.

"Are you alright?" Meyer was asking Clemont as they all climbed into the elevator.

"I just moved my leg wrong." Bonnie looked up at her older brother with worry. He caught her eye and just smiled to show that he was okay.

Bonnie looked out the side of the elevator that overlooked Lumiose City. Everything just looked so normal, but for some reason, it felt...not wrong, but just strange. The feeling stuck with her as they walked through their home above the gym, and into her own room.

Bonnie looked around, stepping from side to side like she didn't know what to do with herself.

"Den?" Dedenne asked her, ears twitching curiously.

Shaking her head to snap herself out of it, Bonnie smiled at her Pokémon. "I'm okay. I'll be okay." She picked Dedenne up and flopped onto her bed. "We're home."

...

Bonnie's face lit up with excitement as she stared down at the large pool below them, a few platforms to stand on littered throughout it. She laughed a bit and said, "Ash has no excuse to lose on this type of field."

From beside her, Misty snorted. "He better not. We've been training in the water for months." She leaned forward a bit to watch as Ash came out onto one side of the arena.

Serena giggled a bit. "Training. Sure."

Misty whipped around and pointed at her over Bonnie's head. "Listen here you—"

"What? I'm not wrong."

Bonnie clapped her hands over her ears. "La la la la I don't need to hear this."

Both of the young women went quiet for a moment, and Bonnie was sure that they were having some kind of silent conversation above her head. She distinctly remembered when the two were a bit awkward around one another *because* of Ash, but here Serena was teasing Misty about him. It was nice, but still a bit weird.

Serena and Misty just started laughing, squishing Bonnie between them playfully. Dedenne squeaked in protest from his spot on her lap.

"Pikachu pi pika," Pikachu said from where he was perched on the back of Misty's chair. Dedenne quickly scrambled up beside him to avoid being squished.

"It's a water field," Bonnie noted, taking her hands away from her ears. "Why didn't he take Pikachu with him?" Surely that would have ended the battle almost instantly.

"He didn't know that beforehand though," Misty explained. "Besides, he wants to give as many of his Pokémon as he can the chance to battle. They've all worked really hard."

Bonnie blinked and then looked down at the arena. A smile spread across her lips as she remembered that Ash absolutely saw his Pokémon as partners, and not tools like some people did. However far they got, that victory would belong to him *and* his Pokémon. That was the type of trainer she wanted to be.

...

Meyer's warm hand was on her shoulder, squeezing gently as they stared at the woman across from them. He seemed more nervous than she was. After all, this wasn't Bonnie's first time meeting Dr. Yvonne.

"If you'd like your father to stay with you, he's welcome to," Doctor Yvonne reminded her. "You know how this works by now."

"Right!" Bonnie nodded her head and then looked up towards Meyer. "I'll be okay. You can go wait in the hall."

Meyer hesitated but nodded his head. "I'll be just outside if you need me to come back in."

"Okay!" She waved to him as he left the room, closing the door behind him. They went through this routine during every appointment so far.

"Your father loves you very much," Dr. Yvonne noted.

"He does, and I love him," Bonnie agreed cheerfully.

This made the doctor laugh a bit. "Now, would you like to get right into the story you were telling me last time? Or would you like to play a game first?"

Bonnie thought about this. Normally they played some sort of game first, but last time her story was cut off halfway. She shook her head. "I'd think I'd like to just keep going. Where was I?"

"You were describing what happened when you were pulled into the car."

"Oh! Right!" Bonnie jumped right back into her story about how Team Rocket had kidnapped her to get Ash to listen to them. It wasn't a story that disturbed her, oddly enough. She was quite proud of her own actions that raised an alarm for a problem that would be much bigger than any of them could have imagined at the time.

"Honestly, I think I was more scared for Ash than me," Bonnie admitted as she finished her story. "It's was *scary*, but I *knew* I'd be okay in the long run. I didn't know about him. I mean, I did, but still, I was worried."

"You look up to him a lot, don't you?"

Bonnie's eyes lit up. "Ash is amazing! I want to be smart like my brother, graceful like Serena, and strong like Ash!" She smiled warmly. "Traveling with them was the best thing ever. A lot of bad things happened, but I met some amazing people too. I talk to Max online all the time. He might even come to Kalos to travel! Tracey and Brock were really awesome too. I didn't really get to spend as much time with everyone else but they were all just so...amazing." She sighed. "I want to be amazing too."

"You *are* amazing, Bonnie," the therapist said. "That is one thing I *can* tell you without a doubt. You strike me very much as the type of person who will fight for their goals no matter what."

"Yeah!" Her enthusiasm waned a bit. "But...I'm old enough to leave home, but I don't know if my father will let me after what happened."

"That is a conversation you need to have with your father. It will be difficult, but be sure to listen to him, and to explain yourself clearly. There's no need for misunderstandings. Tell me, what makes you want to be a trainer so much, aside from your older friends?"

She was relieved that Dr. Yvonne didn't refer to everyone as 'her brother's friends' since they were so much older. Bonnie thought for a moment before clapping her hands together. "I want to be able to help my friends, to explore the world with my own Pokémon. I want to meet new people and Pokémon, and make my own story that's different from Clemont's and everyone else's!" She clenched her hands into fists and stared at the doctor fiercely.

The woman stared back at her for a moment before smiling warmly and nodding in agreement.

It was hard to not be impressed with the young girl.

...

Bonnie looked at the different kinds of makeup before her curiously. "I don't get it. You're pretty without all of this."

Serena laughed at her and said, "Thank you. I use it to give me different looks on camera. You can make yourself look like a completely different person with makeup." She shrugged. "Besides, some people just like wearing makeup for themselves. Nothing wrong with that."

"I don't think I like it," Bonnie said, before nodding at tubes filled with translucent pink liquid and glitter. "Except the lip gloss."

"Maybe we'll see about getting you some of your own." Bonnie jumped as Shauna seemed to appear out of nowhere, already in her performance dress. She smiled at them and said, "Sorry."

"You're sneaky," the young blonde said with a laugh.

"I'll take that as a compliment." Shauna eyed her. "Huh, your hair is getting really long, Bonnie. You should let us try something different with it sometime."

"Oh!" Bonnie's eyes lit up. "Think you could? My dad and Clemont aren't very good with that type of thing."

"You poor, sweet child." Shauna put her hands on her hips and dramatically turned to Serena, pointing at her. "How dare you let her suffer, Serena?"

"I didn't know," she replied with a sigh as she sank into her chair. "Bonnie, do you forgive me for my neglect?"

Deciding to play along, Bonnie tilted her nose into the air. "Well, I *suppose* I can forgive you, if you never let it happen again."

Both of the young women laughed at her response. Shauna clapped her hands together. "Right, I came to tell you that we're starting in fifteen. See you then!" She winked at Serena and left the room.

Serena waved at her, before turning to her mirror and finishing the last touches on her makeup. How pink her cheeks were couldn't be hidden from Bonnie's eyes though.

The young girl frowned a bit before saying, "Serena...why didn't you stay with us when we came back to Kalos?"

"Huh?" Serena looked at her with surprise.

"I know you wanted to keep being a Performer, and we couldn't travel, but it was like you just disappeared." Bonnie looked towards the floor. "Did you just...not want to be around us anymore? I thought you liked my brother."

Serena's eyes softened and she said, "Bonnie. That's not it at all. I did—do like your brother quite a bit, but...I guess I realized that I couldn't let my entire life revolve around another person, especially not a boy." Bonnie remembered how Serena didn't really seem to know what she wanted to do when they first met her, just that she wanted to be around Ash until Shauna introduced them to performances. "It has nothing to do with you, or your brother, really. It has to do with me. Does that make sense? I never meant to make it seem like I was pushing you away."

Slowly, Bonnie nodded her head. "Yeah. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to sound so greedy. You're right. Especially about the whole boy thing." Bonnie made a face. "Who needs a boy?"

"Well, there are always girls too."

"Like Shauna?" Bonnie eyed Serena, and found the reaction she was looking for when the older girl's cheeks went pink again.

"Shauna's amazing. Clemont's amazing. There are a lot of people in the world that are amazing. You just need to see it for yourself," Serena said with a nod. "Don't rush it though."

"Oh, I'm not," Bonnie assured her. "But you need to hurry and get out there. You won't become the queen if you don't win, and you're so close!"

Serena winked at her and ruffled her hair. "You better get out to the audience to watch. I expect to see you in my cheering section!"

Bonnie laughed and waved her off. Like she'd be anywhere else. As Serena left, Bonnie's smile faded slightly. She sighed as she started walking down the hall back to where her seat was. Relationships were so much more complicated than she pictured when she was younger, and she had very little interest in anything like that right now. Maybe someday, but not anytime soon.

...

"What the heck is he *doing*?" Bonnie asked, unable to hide just how annoyed she actually was. She was standing up and practically leaning over the person standing in front of her. Luckily it was only May. Her blue eyes glared at Ash as his Floatzel fell, leaving him with one Pokémon compared to his opponent's three. "Ash is way better than this."

"It's the name," Dawn spoke up from her spot beside May. "Riley. The person who trained him a bit with—well—some things (Bonnie quickly realized she meant Aura) was named Riley and was killed by Team Rocket."

"But, it's just a name!" Bonnie cried out.

"Yes, but sometimes that's all it takes," Clemont told her from Serena's other side. He bit his lip as Ash unleashed his last Pokémon, a Meganium. "Oh, that's not good."

"She can swim," Misty assured him. "And she's strong against that Rhyperior. All she has to do is knock him in and she's good." Misty inhaled sharply before yelling, "Come on, Ash! You can do it!" Apparently, he heard her above the rest of the yelling, because he looked up at them briefly.

"Go Ash!"

"Go Meganium!"

"You can do it!" All of them were cheering loudly for Ash.

Bonnie cheered with them, but she still didn't understand what they meant. How could a name cause him to lose focus so easily?

...

Bonnie stared at the red device before her with wide eyes, fiddling with the braid that Serena had showed her how to do. She looked up at Nurse Joy unsurely and asked, "It's—it's really mine?"

The woman laughed merrily. "Of course it's yours, sweetie. All trainers need a Pokédex!"

Bonnie took the Pokédex with shaking hands, and turned it on to see that her name was, in fact, registered in it. Her eyes watered slightly, because she honestly expected her father to keep her home for a few more years.

Then she realized something else. There was already a Pokémon registered in it. Confusion passed through her, and she clicked on it. Bonnie gasped a bit.

Clemont's laugh reached her ears and she looked up at her brother, having forgot that he was there too. He held out a Pokéball to her and said, "Dedenne was always yours. I was just keeping him for a while."

Bonnie took the Pokéball, knowing that her friend was in there. She always knew that Clemont was going to officially give her Dedenne, but now that the day was here, she couldn't stop herself from tearing up.

She threw herself at her brother and hugged him tightly, sobbing a bit. "Thank you."

"There's no need to thank me," he assured her, his voice softening as he hugged her back. "I know that you'll be great. You've always made all of us proud. Me, dad, *and* mom."

That made her look up at him. "You think that mom would be proud of me?" She had never known

her mother, and was always curious about her.

"I know she would be. Without question."

Bonnie smiled broadly, letting her tears flow down her cheeks. She absolutely believed her brother, and it left her feeling warm.

...

Bonnie cheered loudly as Meganium managed to finish the Magmortar off by throwing it into the pool. It was clear that the Pokémon was absolutely exhausted, but no one could blame her after taking on three Pokémon in a row (well, the first one was knocked out pretty quickly but it still counted).

Ash himself rushed out onto the field as soon as he was allowed, jumping across the platforms until he was kneeling beside his Pokémon, holding her close as she nuzzled him.

Bonnie didn't even care that she was absolutely soaked from the water flying in all directions during the battle. It was still an amazing comeback, and just solidified her beliefs. He was definitely the type of trainer that she wanted to be.



Chapter End Notes

I know this one is a little bit shorter, but again, there's really no rhyme or rhythm to the chapter lengths. Well, they get longer towards the end, so there's that.

It makes me laugh a bit how so many people were just like 'YAY I LIKE THE PART WITH ASH AND MISTY BEST' like bro this is Tracey's chapter. Focus! (I'm kidding...sort of). Someone said that they couldn't believe Ash said he didn't have to waste money on a ring to Misty, but I'd argue that if you can't joke around with your

partner the way they do, you probably shouldn't marry them in the first place.

When we eventually get to Ash's chapter you'll see that he had a lot to deal with, but he's actually really trying to get better and take care of his mental health, and he absolutely can have moments where he just jokes around and moments when he just wants to lay there and basically not exist.

Are we watching the league Ash actually beats? Why don't you guys tell me.

If you have any questions, comments, or concerns, don't hesitate to ask, or send a PM, or even head over to my tumblr, which is just the road you choose (without spaces).

Til next time,

Written by: Skylight Sparkle

Edited by: EchidnaPower

Iris

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Iris shivered, hugging herself as the breeze blew the ice field's cold air over to the stands. She glared at the arena and asked, "Who thought this was a good idea?" She inched closer to Cilan in an attempt to get a bit warmer. "It's warm out, I'm wearing shorts. They should give us a warning."

"Brock did tell us that the ice field was the only one left," Cilan pointed out to her. He patted her shoulder a bit, scooting away slightly.

Iris glared at him. "He told us two seconds before walking in here. That doesn't count." She rocked back and forth a bit. "Come on Ash, you can beat this old dude. What's his name again?"

"Algernon," Leaf answered from in front of her. "I've heard of him. He's known to travel all over the world, not just in the league regions, and will often take part in leagues as an added challenge. He's a Hoenn native." She shook her head. "That Shiftry might be too much for Ash's Quilava, but we'll see."

Fire and powered seeds slammed into each other and a chunk of ice exploded, sending snow up into the stands. Iris shrieked in discomfort, and Cilan couldn't help but laugh.

...

Her fingers ghosted long the soft leaves of the potted plant that sat on the table. She looked at the bright yellow petals with narrowed eyes.

"What's bothering you, Iris?" the therapist asked her kindly. Iris liked the woman. She was very patient and always waited for her to find what she wanted to say.

"Do you think I'm selfish?" she asked her eventually, settling on the question that was bothering her most. Iris had yet to look up at the plant. Nature didn't judge like people did. "I told you the story, and I was more focused on helping a single Pokémon rather than the entire world at first. My friends were fighting for the bigger picture from the beginning, but not me."

"No," she shook her head. "You're not selfish at all, Iris. In fact, that's oddly refreshing to hear."

"Hmm?" Iris looked up at her curiously.

"You took a smaller goal and made it your own, and that's perfectly fine. In fact, that's rather healthy. You did nothing wrong. The small battles mean as much as the big ones. Besides, I dare say it meant everything to Hydreigon."

Iris looked up, surprised at her words. A smile slowly spread across her lips and she nodded her head in agreement. She was right.

...

Iris tried hard not to envy other people. She loved her life and would never state otherwise. Sometimes though, she saw things and wished that she could experience it too. One thing that she always wanted to do was have one of those all-female-sleepovers she heard so much about.

Needless to say, when she finally did get to experience it, it wasn't what she expected at all. She was sharing a room with Misty, Serena, and Leaf. All they had done was read, draw, or do their own things for the most part.

That was until Serena snapped her laptop shut as she finished an assignment that she had to pass in. "Finished!"

"Yipee," Leaf replied from the bed above her sarcastically.

Serena glared up at the bed. From where Iris was sitting on the top bunk across from them, she watched the blonde rear her leg back and jab it into the mattress above her. "Don't be so cranky!"

"What the shit?" Leaf rolled over, dangerously leaning over the edge. Iris couldn't tell, because Leaf was now facing away from her, but she was sure that she was glaring at Serena. "I'm trying to help Ash strategize." She waved her phone around.

"No you're not," Misty spoke up from the bunk under Iris'. She had her eyes glued onto her own phone. "He keeps complaining that you're trying to boss him around and he knows what he's doing."

"Oh my Arceus, I can't believe he tattled on me to you," Leaf said with a huff as she straightened herself up. "Ridiculous."

Iris could picture Misty arching an eyebrow, though she couldn't see it from where she was sitting. "Well," the redhead stated, "he is my boyfriend. Of course he's going to complain to me."

"Yes, because that's what a boyfriend or girlfriend is for," Leaf replied with a roll of her eyes.

Misty made a dismissive noise. "You'll understand someday."

"Wow way to sound like that type of person. And don't ask what type, you know what I'm talking about."

"Single boyfriend. Years." Misty pointed at herself before pointing at Leaf. "One boyfriend. Short period. Lots of other dates before then."

"Exactly. You've only had one."

"Quality over quantity."

"You are both ridiculous," Serena interrupted. She sounded far more amused than Iris expected her to be.

The violet-haired girl thought about it for a moment. Boys. Now there was a thing that they were basically required to talk about, right? Iris didn't actually know. Honestly, the topic didn't interest her all that much, because what was so interesting about them? Though she supposed talking about personal lives might be entertaining.

Who else was she going to get some advice from?

"Question," Iris spoke up from where she was sitting at the edge of the bunk. "How do you make it clear to someone that you like them?"

"Tell them," Leaf said simply.

"Flirt with them," Serena added.

Iris looked down and Misty swung around so that her head was peaking from her bed below. “Kiss them without warning after you think they died but they came back. It worked for me.”

“Okay,” Iris said slowly. “Not helpful.” She made a face, trying to figure out how to word what she meant exactly.

Tired of craning her neck over the side of the bunk, Iris flipped herself over and fell down beside a startled Misty. “What if hinting doesn’t work and you don’t want to tell them because they seem to be pulling away from your hints?”

Misty blinked a few times before saying, “Does this have to do with Cilan?” Across from them, Leaf moved down so that she was sitting beside Serena.

Iris fiddled with hair a bit, her cheeks warming up. “Is it that obvious?”

“A little bit,” Leaf agreed, holding her index and thumb a bit apart as if measuring something.

Iris huffed slightly and sunk back into Misty’s bed. “So he just doesn’t like me.”

Serena raised an eyebrow and Misty scoffed a bit. “I’ll eat my hat if he doesn’t like you too.”

“You don’t have a hat,” Iris blurted out, as if that was the most important thing she said. Instantly, she wanted to smack herself in the face.

“I’ll wrestle Ash’s favourite hat from him and eat that,” Misty insisted.

“Well, If he does, why does he always move away if I flirt a bit?” Iris asked with a pout.

“I don’t want to sound too blunt but...maybe it has to do with the fact that he’s a whole five years older than you,” Leaf pointed out. “I mean, you’re an adult now, yes, but it’s still a bit iffy, age-wise, as we are now. Some people would argue about brain development, being able to make sound decisions, and things like that. It’s a pretty big gap.”

Iris blinked. “I never thought about that.”

“I think Cilan does like you,” Serena agreed, putting her hands on her knees and leaning forward a bit, “but that probably is his problem. He’s keeping his distance for now until you can get older and decide if it’s what you really want.”

Huffing slightly, Iris crossed her arms in front of her. “But what if it’s too late by the time I’m older and he loses interest? What if I’m not interested then?”

“If you’re not...then you’re not. There’s no shame in that. But think, what if he’s still interested? What if you are? That says a lot.”

Serena hummed in agreement. “No one says the first person you go out with has to be your endgame or anything. You can even love more than one person in your life. That’s fine. I used to love Ash, but I don’t feel that way anymore.” She nodded her head towards Misty, who shrugged. It wasn’t news to her at all.

Leaf pointed at them. “That’s true. I like Gary a lot more than anyone else in the past, but it’s not like he’s the first one I kissed, went on a date with, or messed around with. You can do whatever you want and whoever you want.”

“Not everyone is pan like you, Leaf,” Misty replied in a sing-song voice.

Leaf sighed dramatically and waved at the redhead. "Then there are people like Misty here who are one and done. It happens but it's not that common." She eyed the girl in question. "Seriously, was when you guys got together even legal?"

Rolling her eyes, Misty said, "Of course it was. We were the same age and might have kissed five or six times in a year. If that. Holding hands was an event." She shrugged. "Besides, have you been around a lot of kids from 10 to 12? The relationship drama is actually ridiculous. I've seen so many of them go through the gym."

"We're getting off track." Bless Serena, Iris thought. She didn't want to speak up since they were trying to encourage her and give her advice, but was a bit annoyed at the tangent.

Both of the young women had the decency to look a bit embarrassed. "Sorry."

Iris bounced slightly on her spot. "Backtracking to what Leaf said earlier about being with other people. That...doesn't sound fun at all." She made a face and shrugged. "Hugging, cuddling...that sounds okay to me but even the thought of kissing makes me feel a bit blah." She waved her hands around. "Like...I like the romantic and friendship aspects of it but not the physical ones?"

With a laugh, Serena shook her head. "There's nothing wrong with that. You don't have to have relationships either. It's entirely up to you what you do. That's why it's kind of admirable that Cilan is thinking about the age gap and your choices. It's kind of skeezy when people don't."

"If he is," Iris replied glumly.

"No, he is," Misty said almost offhandedly, "I asked him about it." They all stared at her. "What? I was curious, okay?"

"Look," Leaf said, clapping her hands together and leaning forward. "It's okay to be frustrated, but look at all this from Cilan's perspective too and don't bother comparing what's going on with you to anyone else." She shook her head. "I did quite a bit of dating before Gary, a couple flings, with men, women, and everything in between. Yeah, I was younger and stupid, but so were they. Anyway, it doesn't mean I can't commit to one person, but it just didn't interest me before now, and that's fine." She pointed at the blonde she was sitting beside. "Serena thought she was all about guys for a long time, fell in love with one, fell out of love with him, is dating a girl now. That's fine."

"Those two things are completely unrelated. True, but unrelated," Serena butted in.

The brunette paused before shrugging. "Fair enough." She pointed at Misty. "Misty fell in love, and is still there with the same person. That's fine. If you like someone, but he wants to wait until your older, and you don't want to be with anyone else, that's fine. If you do find someone else, that's fine. It's all fine." She waved her hands in the air.

Iris was silent as she let those thoughts sink in. A smile spread across her lips. "Yeah." She perked up a bit more. "Yeah you know what, you're right. You all are. I can wait and see, I'm in no hurry." Iris paused, and then looked at them all curiously. "Is it bad that a part of me still wants to flirt with him because some of his reactions are adorable?"

They all start laughing loudly.

....

Iris breathed out nervously as she stared at the stone statues before her. Zekrom and Reshiram loomed before her, their likeness so much like the real ones that it was rather breath-taking. That

was something that she had never noticed when she was younger. Things had changed though. She had changed.

“Iris!”

She jumped a bit and looked around. A smile appeared on her face when she saw the teenager waving at her. “Shannon! What are you doing here? I thought you were traveling?”

Shannon smiled warmly and shrugged as she came over. “I did. I do sometimes. This place is home though, right? So I keep coming back here. Especially to check on the Pokémon.” Her bright blue eyes went wide. “How have you been? Still trying to be a Dragon Master?”

“I will be one someday,” Iris replied confidently, tilting her head up slightly. She lowered her chin and her smile faded slightly. “Actually, I’m here to visit the Elder. You remember when I was here years ago?”

“Yeah. You helped calm down that Hydreigon.”

“Right. Well, a lot’s happened since then.” Iris almost wanted to laugh at herself for that huge understatement. “It’s funny, I’m actually here for another Hydreigon.”

“Oh, really?” Shannon’s eyes lit up with interest. “Can I see him or her?”

“I already asked the Elder if she could come to the meadow to meet him. You can come, but just... keep back for a few minutes, okay?”

“Now I am even more curious to meet this Pokémon.” Neither of them had heard the Elder come up behind them, so they both ended up jumping this time. The old woman chuckled and then said, “Lead the way, Iris.”

It was a short walk, and she was nervous the entire time. Once they got to the meadow, she moved away from them and took out her Pokéball. Her fingers ran over it for a moment before she silently tossed it into the air.

Hydreigon appeared with a roar, instantly on edge and looking around, no doubt for a fight.

“Hydreigon,” Iris said, forcing herself to be calm. The Pokémon looked at her before relaxing just slightly. He eyed Shannon and the Elder warily though.

“What a wondrous creature,” the Elder noted as she took a few steps forward. She paused and watched as it moved behind Iris a bit, clearly comfortable with her but wary of the other two. “Interesting.”

“His first trainer abandoned him during the Team Rocket-Team Plasma fiasco,” Iris explained, resting her hand on top of his middle head. “I took him in but it was difficult. He was rather... vicious and didn’t trust anyone. He hurt people. Eventually, the Pokéball was destroyed and I told him to run, that it was okay. He followed me and came back for me.”

“I can tell there’s still turmoil,” the Elder said. “But there is loyalty and trust there too. He values you.”

“He’s beautiful,” Shannon added in awe. That seemed to puff Hydreigon up a little more. “You can tell that you’re taking very good care of him.”

“Iris.” She looked around at the Elder. “You were nervous for me to meet him, weren’t you?”

“Yes, I was,” she admitted. “I just...I’m trying so hard to be a good trainer, a good Dragon Master, but I always feel like I’m falling short. I wanted you to meet him to see...well...maybe get some advice on what else I can be doing to help him.”

The Elder laughed. “Of course we will give you more advice. However, you are not falling short, young one. You may still have to go through the Pokémon League to make it official, but in my eyes, you are a true Dragon Master. Your parents would be so proud of you.”

Startled by that, Iris felt her cheeks warm up. A smile spread across her lips, and she felt happy tears prickling behind her eyes. “Thank you.”

She hoped that the Elder was right, and that her parents would be proud of what she had done so far.

...

Iris screamed and jumped to her feet before anyone could announce that Snorlax had won the battle against Kecleon. There was really no need since it was painfully obvious.

“That was anticlimactic,” Gary said from somewhere around her. “Snorlax just basically sat on it, and it was done.”

“Whatever, Wartortle’s match against Mawile was awesome,” Leaf responded.

Iris agreed with both of them, but kept her eyes focused on the arena below. She watched Ash slide over to his Pokémon, laugh and hug the big guy. He got through all the preliminary rounds.

She suddenly felt pride rush through her. Pride and determination. Maybe Ash hadn’t won the league yet, but she wanted to be like him. She was going to become the greatest Dragon Master that Unova had ever seen.

Absolutely nothing was going to get in her way.



Chapter End Notes

A few things: keep in mind that, at this point, the characters are based on my own series, so they are OOC from the anime. While they started out in the same place, and their core characters are the same people they were then, experience is one hell of a teacher and they've changed because of it. So some things may strike you as ooc, but only if you compare it to the anime. These guys aren't 10-years-old, always happy kids. They've got just a little bit of trauma to deal with. Just a bit. (eyes Ash's chapter) Just a bit.

This story will have 14 chapters following Ash's 12 travelling companions (as of XY), plus himself and Leaf. So we're not getting Pikachu, Team Rocket, or anyone else's POV. Good for Jessie/James actually, because they really need to keep themselves scarce at this point for a while.

I'm genuinely trying to keep a combination of humour, forms of fluff (platonic and romantic in some cases), along with the angst. Again, like I kept saying with WTWE, this isn't about despair. It's about hope in spite of despair.

Thank you for everyone who has been reading this, even if you're not reviewing. I'd love to hear from you all, don't be shy, but if you just want to read, that's okay!

Question: Who do you think the next chapter is about?

Also thank you to EchidnaPower who has everything else to worry about but still jumped on editing late last night after I had a mild online panic about the fact that this wasn't edited yet. You're awesome!

Til next time,

Written by Skylight Sparkle
Edited by EchidnaPower

May

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

May stood at the end of two sets of bars that were spaced a few feet apart. She bit her lip, fingers twitching as she willed herself to stay still. Her blue eyes focused on Drew, who was slowly making his way towards her, steps slow and shaky.

She tried to stay silent when he fell, but couldn't stop the squeak that escaped her lips. She rushed forward, hands reaching out to help him up. With a great scowl, Drew pushed her away. "I'm fine."

"But I—"

"I'm fine! Just leave me alone!" She pressed her lips together, and the harshness in his eyes faded away as he sighed. "Sorry." He shifted a bit, pulling his injured leg to his chest. "It's just frustrating." He didn't say it was painful, but he didn't have to. That was obvious.

"It's okay," May answered, kneeling on the padded floor beside him.

"It's not," Drew said with a shake of his head, green hair falling into his eyes. "I should just be grateful I'm alive at all...which I am...but it just..."

"Drew?" She leaned forward a bit to catch his eye. "Drew, it's okay." May took his hand into hers. "It's okay."

...

Blinking her sapphire eyes with confusion, May turned her attention to the boy at the opposite end of the arena from Ash. He had dark hair and a backwards cap, and she was almost *positive* that she had seen him in the stands mere moments ago.

Twisting around in her seat, she searched the stands, trying to figure out how this Ethan character had managed to teleport from the top of the stands to the field so quickly. They weren't allowed to *use* their Pokémon there (though they were allowed to watch).

"What's wrong?" Dawn asked her curiously.

May looked back to her and nodded towards the trainer. "I *swear* I just saw that Ethan kid in the stands."

The blue-haired girl laughed merrily. "You must have seen his older brother, Jimmy. I met them before in New Bark Town when I was visiting Lyra once. They look a lot alike. Kinda like Brock and his siblings." She paused. "Not like us and our brothers."

Red tinted May's cheeks. "Oh. I guess that makes some kind of sense." She laughed. "Sometimes I forget that we've all been doing our own things. It feels like we've all just been together for so long."

Dawn smiled. "I know what you mean." She looked back to the trainers down below, her smile fading.

"What's wrong?"

"Misty and Brock said that the last time Ash competed in Kanto, this is where it ended for him. He lost against Ritchie," Dawn explained, looking sad.

May thought about that for a moment before her eyes widened. "He was the one who—"

Dawn nodded her head. "I met him. He was a really nice person. Reminded me a lot of Ash." She nodded towards her brother. "I hope it's not going to impact him in this round, but it probably will."

Looking down, May frowned sadly. She wished that there had been a way to bring everyone back, not just Drew.

...

Shifting the heavy bags on her shoulder, May looked down at the list of things that she needed. Everyone was working so hard at fixing up her father's gym and the other damaged buildings in Petalburg, and she wanted to do her part. Unfortunately, that ended up with her bring the errand girl, constantly running to get things that people needed.

She decided to slip around the backroads by the train tracks. It was a slightly creepy place, it made the trip home a lot quicker. Normally, she liked the walk home, but given how heavy the bags were, May just wanted to get home as soon as possible.

"May!"

She screamed as she jumped, dropping both of the bags to the ground. Clutching her hand to her chest, she whirled around, meeting a pair of apologetic, yet amused, bright blue eyes.

"Brendan!" She exclaimed once she got over her shock. A small laugh escaped her lips as she threw her arms around him in a tight hug that he eagerly returned. "I'm so glad you're okay!"

"You too! I was super worried!" Brendan took a step away from her and smiled warmly. "Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. Much."

"Jerk," she laughed. She scooped up one of the bags that she had dropped. Brendan quickly grabbed the other one, and they started walking in the direction of the gym. "What have you been up to?"

"Oh, I'm helping my dad with a lot of things. He's been doing a lot of research on the impact the fake legends had on Pokémon habitats lately and needs a hand." He looked at her curiously.

"What about you?"

"I'm helping my family fix up the gym and other things around Petalburg." She eyed him.

"Planning on become a Professor?"

He snorted. "Not likely. You becoming a Gym Leader?"

May laughed, trailing off a bit when she heard a familiar, distant rumbling sound. Her heart started beating a little faster, though she wasn't quite sure why. "What are you even doing here anyway?"

He blushed a bit in embarrassment. "Honestly? I volunteered to do a survey around here because I wanted to see if you were around and okay."

May was about to tease him about being a sweet sap, when a train rumbled by them. The bag fell from her shoulder, and suddenly she was on a train, holding on tightly to Drew's hand as Serena held onto her, both of them starting to slip.

"May! It's okay! You're okay!"

She blinked and was staring at Brendan's worried face. A sob broke out of her lips and she leaned forward, her head resting on his shoulder as her tears fell and her body shook. He hugged her close, muttering that she was okay.

...

May grimaced and leapt to her feet as Ethan's Sudowoodo took down Ash's Torkoal. The battle so far had been long and intense, with Pidgeot defeating Meganium, only to be defeated by Weavile, who was defeated by Talonflame. Sudowoodo had defeated both Talonflame and Torkoal.

Ash's hand hovered over his Pokéballs, frowning a bit.

"Come on, why are you hesitating?" May muttered, leaning forward.

"Ethan's stats say that he has some pretty powerful Pokémon. Odds are he probably has his Blissey or Quagsire with him," Max explained. "Ash is trying to think which ones would be best to save for one or both of those. We don't even know what Pokémon Ash himself has with him. He's used different ones every time around, and hasn't had Pikachu on his team at all yet."

"Charizard and Ria too," Dawn pointed out from May's other side. The younger trainer nodded.

Finally, Ash tossed a Pokéball, revealing his Leavanny.

"Come on Ash!" May yelled loudly, leaning forward over the stands. "You can do it!" She started swaying a bit, and Max grabbed her around the waist, yanking her back and forcing her to sit down before she could topple over the edge.

"You're a spaz," he muttered to her, shaking his head.

...

Twisting her fingers together, May shifted on the chair that she was sitting on. It was comfortable, and the room was inviting, but she still felt like there were a horde of Beautifly trying to escape her stomach.

The woman across from her smiled warmly. "There's really no need to be so nervous."

"I don't want to be locked away for being a psycho!" she blurted out.

The woman laughed. "You won't be, I promise. I'm here to help you, not judge or incarcerate you."

May continued to look around, eyes falling on the woman's desk that was sitting away from them. "My brother goes to see a Doctor Jones too, but he said his doctor was a guy."

"My husband," the woman admitted. "Two psychologists make for really interesting dinner conversations. Don't worry though, we never talk about patients or clients."

The brunette slowly nodded her head and looked back down to her hands. "I guess...I...I might have done a terrible thing to someone from Team Rocket in the past. Tried to."

"Many people did. Many people wanted to."

"It just hurt so much!" she burst out. "I thought they had killed Drew—that I had let him die because of them—I didn't know he was alive. I wanted to get revenge. I was *so* angry that I almost

made my Pokémon..." She trailed off and shook her head, wiping away her tears with the back of her hand.

"You didn't though," Dr. Jones told her. "You know the difference between right and wrong, May. Does the thought of hurting them making you feel any better?"

"Not at all," May admitted. "It makes me feel sick to think about."

"You're a good person, May. You're a good coordinator. A good trainer."

May shrugged. "I'm not really sure what I am right now."

...

"I can do this," May whispered to herself. "I can do this." She tried to take a few steps towards the doors to the contest hall, but froze. "I can't do this." Turning on her heel, May walked away from the hall, heading towards the railing that cut off the cliff's edge from the beach below. She leaned against the warm metal, and looked at the ocean.

After taking a few deep breaths, she turned once again to look at the contest hall, back pressed against the railing. Her brow furrowed slightly as she caught sight of a small girl who had to be only ten, shyly peeking through the doors, but scurrying back a little bit whenever someone came to the doors.

Slowly, May made her way towards the girl, trying not to startle her. "Hi there." The young girl jumped and stared at May with wide, brown eyes. So much for not startling her. "Sorry about that! I couldn't help but notice you seem to be a bit nervous about going inside." She understood that.

The girl blushed and scuffed her shoes against the ground. "I just...I'd *like* to try contests but... well...I'm not supposed to."

"Not supposed to?" May repeated, like she didn't understand the words.

"Mom and Dad say that I should be a competitive battler, and I should help with rebuilding, not worry about looking pretty." Realizing what she had just blurted out, the girl looked embarrassed again. "Sorry. I don't know why I said that."

"I asked. There's no need to be embarrassed," the brunette assured her. She eyed the younger girl for a moment before saying, "You know what? Contests *aren't* about looking pretty. Did you know the Cerulean City Gym Leader, Daisy Waterflower, bases her battling style on contests? Besides, you can help rebuild as you travel, I'm a coordinator too and I do it all the time."

"You're a coordinator too?" The girl seemed suddenly excited.

May paused for a moment, the words echoing in her head. The thought of her Pokémon battling in a dark prison flashed before her eyes, before the thought of laughing with her Pokémon as they worked out new moves and routines together overtook it. Her mouth opened slightly, and in almost a surprised whisper, she said, "I am." Straightening her shoulders a bit, she smiled brightly and spoke clearly. "I am a coordinator. Come on, I'll show you where to sign up, if you'd like to."

"Thank you!" The girl jumped from one foot to another, looking like May had offered her the world on a platter.

It absolutely warmed her heart.

...

May was focused so intensely on the battle, that she didn't even notice Drew sitting behind her again until he tapped her with his cane. She jumped and then looked over her shoulder, blinking at the food that he was holding out to her.

Drew rolled his eyes. "Don't look so stunned. I knew you'd be whining about food eventually."

"Well, thank you." She accepted the hotdog and the drink from him, glancing back in time to see Ash's Corphish and Ethan's Quagsire both collapse at the same time. They were down to their last Pokémon each. "You should have let me get the food."

Drew snorted. "Just because I have a messed up leg doesn't mean I can't do things on my own."

May opened her mouth and then closed it again. How could she argue, when she had proof that he had accomplished his task on his own just fine? She was briefly distracted as the two trainers released their final Pokémon.

Ethan's notorious Blissey finally made an appearance, causing May to wince slightly. That grimace instantly left her face when she saw Ash's Pokémon though.

Dawn laughed loudly beside her. "Garchomp. Ash has this in the bag. No need to worry."

May looked back down at her food before turning to Drew again. "You're right. Thank you."

He seemed slightly taken back by the fact that she wasn't trying to mother him, but decided to take it, nodding at her before they all turned their attention back to the battle below.

Though May watched the Pokémon fight, she couldn't help but let her mind wander. No need to worry. That's all she had been doing lately, wasn't it? Worrying about her friends. Her Pokémon. Her home. If she could be a coordinator. It was all okay to worry about, but it was consuming her life.

Maybe Doctor Jones was right. Maybe she did need to learn to let things go.

...

"...And then the girl, Millie, she did so well on her second contest and I'm so proud! I also started helping this sweet young boy who's down on himself for losing. He just needs a boost in confidence!"

Doctor Jones smiled at her warmly. "It certainly sounds like you've been having fun."

May blushed a bit, but not from embarrassment. Not entirely. She shifted in her seat a bit. "I still love being a coordinator. I had forgotten how much fun it was. But you know? I'm almost having *more* fun helping the new coordinators get their footing. When I win or do well in a contest, I feel so happy with myself, but when they do well, I just—it's an even greater feeling."

"Hmm." The therapist leaned forward slightly. "Sounds to me like you enjoy teaching them. Have you thought of that before?"

May's brow furrowed slightly as she thought about. "No. It never even occurred to me. I didn't know that people did that."

"Just because something doesn't exist or isn't as popular doesn't mean it can't in the future," the

doctor pointed out. "There's still lots of time to think, plan, and dream. You don't have to know exactly what you want, or exactly who you want to be right now. Just enjoy life all the good things in life, and you'll figure out the rest eventually."

"Who I am," May muttered thoughtfully. That was something she had struggled with weeks before during one of their sessions. She thought about it, images of her friends pushing past the horrors of the past. "I am a daughter. I am a sister. I am a friend. I am...I'm a trainer. I'm a coordinator! I'm..." She trailed off, her thoughts coming to a sudden stop.

"Yes?"

"I'm me."

...

Without a care that her food was now all over the floor, May screamed excitedly and jumped to her feet. Below them, Ash was hugging Garchomp, before approaching Ethan to shake his hand.

Excitement coursed through her, and she heard Brock say, "Now we're into the unknown. This is where he ended last time."

Those words made something inside of her flutter with anticipation. May couldn't wait to see how everything would turn out.



Chapter End Notes

Sorry, I was going to update yesterday, but life happened. Here we are though!
Absolutely no one guessed right about whose chapter this was going to be!

A lot of people last time questioned the part of Serena having a girlfriend and not

being with Clemont. I answered them directly but I'll tell everyone else too so there's no confusion. All that character development in WTWE wasn't for nothing, I promise. At the same time though, there's no rule that says 'now they have to be together'. Nah. Everyone grows, develops, and changes differently. It's one of the things that Serena's chapter directly tackles, so you'll see then!

Once again, thank you to my awesome beta who tries so hard to get chapters done for Tuesdays even though he's super busy. You're a blessing EP!

So the same question as last week: Who's next?

Til next time,

Written by Skylight Sparkle

Edited by EchidnaPower

Cilan

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Anticipation welled up in Cilan as he walked through the crowd. His bright green eyes darted from one side of the room to the other, looking for the faces that he so longed to see in person. He had been away from them longer, but the context was so very different.

Finally, he saw it. Shocks of fiery red and watery blue not far from the door. Cilan started speeding forward, trying not to let his emotions get the best of him. A part of him wanted to cry.

Chili met him halfway, throwing his arms around him in an unapologetic display of brotherly affection. Cress met them a moment later, completing their good luck.

"I missed you guys," Cilan said, trying not to choke on his own words. "I thought you were *gone* for the longest time."

"I think mom and dad we're watching over us that night," Cress admitted. "We almost didn't get away, but we did."

Cilan liked that thought, that their parents were watching over them and helping them along this whole time.

...

Cilan grimaced, fighting down the urge to run onto the arena below and cradle Ash's poor Unfezant in his arms. Ash had the unfortunate luck of having the type disadvantage for the first round of his match with a trainer named Melina. With her golden hair and eyes, Cilan easily recognized her as a fairly well-known trainer from Unova. She was known for her sheer strength and almost brute force, and just how easily she took down his Unfezant only further proved that.

Turning his gaze towards Ash, trying to gauge his reaction at such a quick defeat. Ash's eyes were narrowed as he stared at a smug Melina. Suddenly, his lips ticked up into a smile as he tossed a Pokéball into the air, unleashing his Krookodile.

"There's an air of excitement around both of them," Cilan noted out loud, grimacing a bit as Zebstrika slammed itself into Krookodile, who quickly threw the other Pokémon. "No finesse at all."

"I don't think Ash is really worried about finesse," Clemont, who was sitting beside him, noted. He winced a bit as electricity ripped the flying stones apart. "He should be worried about getting hit by flying debris!"

Cilan hummed in agreement. He was no stranger to competitive battling, having been a Gym Leader once, but it still astounded him just how powerful trainers and their Pokémon could become when they worked together.

...

After coming to visit his Pokémon League approved therapist several times, Cilan decided that he liked the décor. It was simple, but very nice, laid out in an eye-pleasing way. He was particularly fond of the landscape painting that included a beautiful, classic train. He would have to ask who

the painter was to see if they had anything within his budget.

That wasn't what he was focusing on right now though. Instead, he glanced back at his therapist. "You know, I'm not too sure what I want to do with myself right now. I think a lot of my friends feel the same way at this point."

"That's understandable," the man assured him. "You all went through a lot. Let's focus on you for right now. What *exactly* do you mean when you say you don't know what to do with yourself right now?"

"I was a Gym Leader once," Cilan explained, getting comfortable in the chair. "However, I've been traveling as a connoisseur for quite a while now. Learning. Growing. I used to know what I wanted to do with that, but now...it's like it's not enough. I want to be home, but I don't want to be a Gym Leader. You know? I don't know what I want."

The therapist looked thoughtful for a moment. "Well, what are some things you don't want to do?"

He turned his green eyes to the ceiling in thought. "I...I think I'm all adventured out – at least great big, grand adventures. I don't want to be a Gym Leader, or a connoisseur. I just...want to use my abilities and the things that I love to make people happy."

"There's nothing wrong with that. It's okay to think smaller. There are many ways to make people happy that don't involve taking on an international crime syndicate."

Cilan chuckled. "I suppose there is. But you know...I guess what's really holding me back is the fact that I don't want to let my brothers, or my parents down."

The therapist was quiet for a moment, before offering a bit of advice. "Perhaps you can speak to your brothers about your thoughts. As for your parents, would they be more upset if you kept doing something that made you unhappy, or if you let go of the past to chase something that makes you happy."

He looked down at his hands. "I genuinely don't know."

...

Leaning forward, Cilan watched with wide eyes as Ash's Muk slowly removed himself off of Melina's Stoutland. He wasn't at all surprised to see that the Pokémon was out cold. He was fairly certain he could hear Professor Oak laughing at the outcome, saying something about it being Muk's specialty.

He glanced towards Melina again, who seemed far less excited and far more angry at this point. She seems to hesitate when picking her next Pokémon, before unleashing her Emboar. He had heard of her Emboar before, and it was supposed to be absolutely vicious.

"She's tough," Clemont said from beside him. "Brutal, almost. She would have beat me at my gym hands down."

"Me too. I think she faced off against Chili when she came through our gym," Cilan agreed.

"There's almost an air of desperation surrounding her now though." He looked at the other end of the field. "Ash, on the other hand, seems to be getting calmer."

"He knows what he wants," Clemont responded. "He has a very clear goal in his mind, and he's not going to let anyone else take him down without giving it his all. It must be nice to absolutely know what you want from the future."

Cilan was startled a bit by that and glanced over at him. "What?"

Clemont shrugged slightly. "I'm just thinking about my gym a lot lately and the future."

"That makes two of us," Cilan agreed with him. It was strange, really. He shouldn't have been relieved that someone else was in almost the exact same boat as him, but he was all the same.

At least he wasn't the only one unsure of the future.

...

Iris was practically brimming with energy and excitement. Her brown eyes were shining as she waved her hands through the air wildly, the sunlight bouncing off of her violet hair. Cilan watched her, affection brimming through him as he practically absorbed the excitement she exuded. She was absolutely fascinating and beautiful.

That didn't really matter though. He would grin, and be a supportive friend for now, nothing more. Maybe someday that would change when the gaps between them weren't so big, but definitely not now.

"I know you can become an official Dragon Master," Cilan assured her as she finished telling him about her visit to the Village of Dragons. "Not that you *need* it, but I'm sure you'll do it." He paused. "It almost doesn't seem good enough for you, really."

"What?" Iris asked, brow furrowing but a smile threatening to cross her features.

Excitement burst through Cilan as he clapped his hands together. "You should become the Champion! I can just picture it!"

Iris was silent for a moment before she laughed merrily. "No, I don't think so. Thank you though." She smiled warmly. "I don't want all the responsibility that comes with that." She paused, her voice dripping down into almost a whisper like she was about to tell him something scandalous. "I mean, I'll be stronger than the champion, but they don't have to know that."

He laughed. "You're amazing."

"Careful," she responded in a sing-song voice. "I might think you're flirting."

Instantly, he felt like all of the energy had drained out of him, replaced with guilt. He frowned, not really knowing what to say for once. "Iris..."

She seemed to catch on that she made him uncomfortable. She waved her hands in the air wildly. "No! Sorry! You don't have to say anything, or explain anything." He opened his mouth to protest, and she glared in response, clearly daring him to interrupt her. He chose to stay silent for once. "We'll see if there's room for that in the future. Not now." She tilted her head up defiantly. "I'm too busy becoming a Master right now anyway. And you need to...write your book of trains...or drama...or connoisseurs...or something."

Relief washed through him and he felt his mood instantly rise back up. "Excuse you, my book is a dramatic retelling of a train connoisseur. Get it right."

Iris snorted. "Seriously though, what about you? When are you and your brothers opening up the gym again?"

"We're not," Cilan answered. He held a finger up to silence her surprised question that he could see

coming. "We're making it better."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Chili is going to travel for a bit, while Cress and I focus on the restaurant part for now. We're going to have it decorated like it was before, and we're thinking of having a field be for entertainment battles only." He smiled slightly. "We want to open a chain of restaurants some day, and being gym leaders doesn't leave much room for that."

"So the trio badge is being retired?"

"Yeah." He sounded very wistful about that. "We're going to use it as our logo instead. That way we have a part of our parents' legacy living on, but we're also following our own dreams instead."

Iris's smile was almost blinding. "That sounds amazing! Hey! You could have a mystery special where you figure out what the people want to eat based on their emotions and personalities!"

He practically bounced on the spot, feeding off of her excitement again. "I was thinking the same thing!"

Her face became solemn. "For the sake of our friendship though, do me a favour."

"Okay?" His smile dropped, brow furrowing with concern.

"Please don't name it something stupid like Train-er's Fine Dining or something."

Cilan laughed so hard that he had tears in his eyes and had to hold his sore stomach.

...

There was a tense silence through the crowd as Greninja landed on the ground in a crouch before straightening up, his back towards Melina's Zoroark. No one moved, though Cilan could clearly, even from this distance, detect the grin starting to appear on Ash's face.

He knew he had won, but wasn't about to celebrate yet.

Finally, Zoroark swayed, and fell to the ground.

"Zoroark is unable to battle! Greninja wins the battle! The match goes to Ash Ketchum!"

Cilan stood as he cheered and clapped for his friend. Like every other time, Ash hugged his Pokémon before heading towards his opponent. He held out his hand after Melina recalled her Zoroark. She looked at it before turning her head up and turning away.

"Wow," Cilan said with a frown. "How tasteless." He knew it wouldn't look good on her for being such a sore loser.

Ash seemed surprised, frowning a bit as he watched her go. The trainer turned back to his Pokémon, once again congratulating him on a good battle.

...

"You ready to go?" Cilan asked Chili, who was staring out the door with his red back slung over his shoulder.

"Yeah, I think so." He looked at his two brothers and smiled. "You two sure you can hold down

the fort while I'm gone?"

"We'll be fine," Cress assured him.

"Absolutely," Cilan agreed.

Chili nodded and looked at the door. "Well, as long as you're sure you won't burn it down. I guess I'll get going." He blinked rapidly, something his two brothers decided to ignore. Cilan understood the excitement of a new adventure, but also the apprehension about separating from one another again.

"Go," Cilan shoved his brother towards the door. "It'll be worth it."

Chili stared at him before smiling and nodding.

As their red-haired brother walked away, Cilan and Cress stood at the door frame and watched him go.

"He'll be okay," Cress decided.

"Yeah," Cilan agreed with a smile. It was nerve-wracking, but it was okay. They were all heading exactly where they needed to be.



Chapter End Notes

About the order of characters: Max was chosen first for several reasons. It started with the fact that this title, *Who You Want To Be*, is a line from the song *Make A Wish*, which features in the *Jirachi* movie that Max was a key character in. I also struggle with writing him. So he was first. After that, it was random and things changed around

a few times. I eventually decided to put Tracey and Bonnie with him since they were with him for most of WTWE.

From there, it was supposed to be random. Iris, May, and now Cilán. There's really no rhyme or reason for many of the characters. No need to look for secret connections or anything!

Til next time,

Written by Skylight Sparkle

Edited by EchidnaPower

Clemont

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Clemont glared at his leg from his awkward position on the floor, mentally wondering if it would be worth it just to chop the thing off. Prosthetics were highly advanced, with connections to the nerves to guarantee proper movement. It didn't even matter to him that they were made from plastics and metals, at least it would stop hurting. It'd also probably work properly, unlike his own leg at the moment.

He sighed and flopped back onto the cold, metal floor of his workshop. He had been trying to work on a new invention that had been digging at his thoughts lately. His leg had other ideas though.

A shadow loomed over him, blocking the bright lights above him. He blinked and then smiled, reaching up and running his fingers through Luxray's fur. "I'm okay."

The Pokémon eyed him skeptically, so Clemont first pushed himself up into a sitting position, before trying to push himself to stand. For a moment, he thought it was successful, before his leg seized again and he stumbled forward. Luckily for him, Luxray managed to catch him.

He sighed and leaned on his Pokémon. "You know...I'm not sure I can be a gym leader anymore. I can barely stand up for a long period of time." Luxray growled slightly. "I know, I know...that shouldn't matter. I just...I don't know...I don't want to build the Clembot again and Dad's handling it for now. I just...don't know..."

...

Clemont bounced nervously in his seat, eyes flickering from the battle arena to the device in his hands. He was looking up the stats and information about the trainer Ash was facing, while also trying to size-up the girl facing his friend. She was certainly beautiful with her brown skin, dusty-purple hair, and vibrant pink dress. There was something about her that reminded him of Serena. At the same time though, she exuded confidence in a way his blonde friend just possibly couldn't.

"She's from Alola," he noted. "She's pretty amazing on paper."

"Ash will beat her," Bonnie said, sounding completely sure of herself. She leaned over to look at the screen. "It says there she's a fire-type trainer. He can destroy her!"

"She made it this far though, so don't underestimate single-type trainers." Clemont's arm fell across her shoulders. "You want to train electric-types, don't you?"

Her cheeks turned pink and she nodded her head, realizing the hypocrisy of her statement.

"Besides, Ash has never even *seen* Alolan Pokémon before," he added. "We'll see how he handles this."

The second he was done talking, the battle began. He had no idea what Pokémon it was that Adriana released, but it kind of reminded him of what a Torkoal may look like if it evolved. The information came up on the screen saying that it was called a Turtonator, and it was part dragon.

Ash frowned a bit before tossing his Pokéball, revealing his Glalie. Clemont inhaled sharply, knowing what Ash was trying to do. He just hoped that it worked.

...

A large part of Clemont was glad that he had a different therapist from Bonnie. He would have been tempted to ask how she was doing, even if they couldn't actually tell him anything. That doctor specialized in treating younger children, where this man treated anyone within the Pokémon League. It never really occurred to him that the league would need therapists on hand, but given how intertwined they were with the G-Men, he supposed that it made sense.

Doctor Charron was an elderly man with a lot of wisdom in his silvery eyes. Clemont quite liked him, and he was pretty sure the feeling was mutual, but who actually knew?

"How are you feeling today?" Charron asked him cheerfully.

"I'm..." Clemont straightened up a bit in his chair and thought about his answer. A smile appeared on his face and he nodded his head. "I'm good, actually. I'm having a very good day. Could we talk about that for a bit instead?" Instead of the frustration he got with therapy, the fear of telling his father that he didn't want to run their mother's gym anymore.

"Absolutely!"

He once again thought about how he wanted to word everything. The first time he came to therapy, he had been nervous about feeling judged and wasting the man's time with small worries and fears, but he soon realized that the small things mattered because they added up over time. Doctor Charron always encouraged talking about the small things along with the bigger things that he had seen.

"I was able to finish fixing my portable computer the way I wanted," he explained, his mind flashing back to a time when he couldn't get a computer to work properly.

"Leaf, this isn't me, and I'm the only one of us connected to the system here."

He cleared his throat. "I think it has more features now than anything else on the market."

The doctor laughed. "Perhaps I should commission you to fix up my monstrosity of a machine. Maybe add a few new features. I'm sure you could do much better than the people they get around here. I swear, I try to make it print and it does everything but."

Clemont forced out a chuckle, but unfortunately, his mind went back to that dark, dark place. Hearing a loud bang as Beartic fell to the floor, and having Leaf's screams pierce his ears. He stared directly at Charron, "You wouldn't have to commission it! I could do it as a favour."

"Do me a favour. Close your eyes and hum really loudly. Or sing."

"What-?"

"Please."

"Clemont?" Doctor Charron broke him out of his dazed thoughts. He locked eyes with the man, seeing the worry cross his features. "Where did you go just now?"

Clemont had a very good day. He wanted to talk about the fact that he was very slowly breaching the fact that he didn't want to be a Gym Leader anymore. He wanted to talk about the ideas he mapped out in blueprints. He didn't want to go back to that place. Anywhere but there.

Except he couldn't escape it right now.

He stared directly at the doctor, and with Leaf and Venusaur's hums echoing in his memory, he said, "I couldn't get the power off in time."

...

Clemont grimaced as Noivern slammed into the ground, skidding along the surface as dust kicked up in the air. He leaned forward to look down at the Pokémon, but already he knew that the dragon wasn't getting back up.

Around him, all of his friends were on their feet, yelling encouragement for Ash. He tried to push himself up to do the same, grimacing as pain rushed through his leg and he ended up stumbling backwards into his seat.

Clemont glared fiercely at his leg as he rubbed it, before checking around to make sure that none of his friends had seen. He didn't need them worrying about him right now. As he was looking around, he ended up catching Drew's eye, who was sitting behind and diagonal from him.

The younger, green-haired boy had definitely noticed. He raised an eyebrow and tapped his own leg, the opposite of Clemont's. "I get it."

Clemont blinked a couple times, before shame rushed through him. Back on the train in Hoenn, he wasn't able to help Drew, and now the younger boy would never be able to walk normally again. He, on the other hand, would eventually regain all function with a bit more therapy and exercise.

"Sorry," the blond said to him. No one else was listening to them, too focused on the battle below. "I shouldn't get so frustrated or complain. Not when I *will* get better eventually."

Drew shook his head. "You didn't do this. Besides, I'm glad you'll be able to walk normally." He motioned towards the plain cane at his side. "I'm going to need one of these for the rest of my life – or something else. It's not that bad. I'm still here, after all." He looked at the cane thoughtfully. "I wonder if I could get a Flygon or something on the end of one of them."

Clemont laughed. It was lifting to see someone else who was going through something similar (albeit worse) be positive about it.

He turned back to the battle below. "He's cutting it close."

"He'll do it," Drew insisted, sounding rather confident. Out of the corner of his eye, Clemont could see him pointing. "That Donphan of his is going to plow through more than one of Adriana's Pokémon. He'll do it."

"I hope so."

...

He tried to hide his massive, eye-watering, ugly yawn, but he was so tired of staring at catalogues that his vision was starting to blur as he looked from one picture to the next. He pushed his glasses up to wipe the corner of his eyes before focusing on the task at hand.

It really wasn't a difficult task, and given that his father was doing almost everything else when it came to running the gym now, he figured this was the least he could do.

Clemont perked up a bit as he came across a pair of overalls. "What about this?"

Serena, who had been silently and steadily flipping through magazines on the other side of the

table, paused to look at the picture. Her face scrunched up. "Clemont—"

"I like overalls!" he protested instantly, feeling a bit defensive.

"And *you* can pull them off," she agreed, causing him to flush a bit. "Get a pair for yourself to wear as you work – it makes sense for you – but let's be real, the odds of someone buying that from the gift shop is slim to none."

He groaned and slumped down, his forehead hitting the book on the table. "This is impossible. Why can't we just stick with the hoodies and pants?"

"You are, but your dad wants a couple other options, which I think is a great idea! Here, look at these." He looked up at the sound of shuffling paper, and realized that the pile of catalogues that he assumed were ones she just tossed aside were once again being spread out, and she was quickly going to pages she had folded over. "Look here – you can get these t-shirts and tank tops for men, women, and kids. They come in lots of different colours and the fabric isn't that generic, stiff junk. Over here you can get windbreakers and even these nice winter jackets. This one here has mitts and gloves. There's a summer one where you can get flip-flops. And of course, this one gives you a variety of hats that aren't just caps."

Clemont stared at the pictures before looking up at her. "I can see how this stuff would appeal to others but I'm not sure we have the budget for all these."

"That's why you'd have to do seasonal stuff rather than just all-year-round stuff," she explained, and pulled a pad of paper and a pencil out of seemingly nowhere. She flipped through it quickly, and he caught sight of sketches of different outfits. Stopping on a page, she wrote down the numbers he had messily jotted down earlier on a napkin, and quickly started breaking it up. "If you go seasonal, it should work."

"You're...really good at math."

Serena flushed a bit, tapping the pencil against the paper. "Just some parts. Money and measurement. Don't give me that theoretical nonsense."

He laughed a bit. "Sure. Well, I'll take your word for it." He nodded at the catalogues. "Thanks for helping me, by the way. I know you've been busy lately."

"It's no problem," Serena said, a genuine smile spreading across her face. "It's nice to sit down and do something like this."

"You seem to like being in front of the camera." Realizing that this sounded a bit negative, especially from the way she raised an eyebrow at him, Clemont quickly waved his hands and clarified, "I mean that I've seen a lot of you on the TV lately and you're very photogenic. I saw your performance on the TV the other day and it was really impressive." He looked down at the catalogues. "Who better to get to help pick out clothes than someone who knows how to make things look good all the time, right?"

She smiled again. "Thanks, Clemont." Suddenly looking antsy, she asked, "Did you see the interview after the performance?"

He thought back and nodded. "I thought you did a great job talking about how anyone can and should help the other regions. It's true, even if nothing happened here, it's still all of our responsibility to help others. I think you're really reaching people!"

"So it didn't sound too awkward or preachy?"

"No? Why would it?" He cast her a confused look and she just shook her head.

"Never mind. I just...it's really important to me, you know? I want to help more...I know some of our friends work so hard to help rebuild every day, but I just...I feel like this is more within my capabilities to help, you know?"

Clemont nodded his head and stared at her with a faint smile. "I admire the fact that you're so sure of yourself now. You don't question your abilities or your goals." Unlike him.

Serena seemed startled by this a bit, and opened her mouth to say something, but seemed to change her mind. Instead, her brow furrowed as she stared at him, and Clemont was suddenly sure that her cerulean-blue eyes were seeing right *through* him.

A bit of panic suddenly erupted in him as he realized he sounded almost bitter when he spoke, enough to put that concerned look on her face. He didn't *really* want to talk about it right now.

Serena didn't ask though. If she saw through him, she also saw that he just wanted to let it go. Instead, she reached across the table and squeezed his hand before turning her attention back to the catalogues.

He was more than just a little grateful.

...

Clemont cheered loudly, actually leaping out of his seat successfully this time. Kingler was stumbling a bit, but it didn't matter, since the Incineroar he took on was visibly knocked out. He couldn't even hear the official announcement of Ash winning the battle, it was so loud.

Ash wasted no time calling back Kingler, who was about to faint too. He muttered something no one could hear to the Pokéball before meeting Adriana halfway and shaking her hand. She said something to him, causing Ash to squint at her and then laugh. He shook his head and said something back. He then turned and looked up at his friends, waving and smiling at them broadly.

Though he didn't have Aura, Clemont very well knew why Ash was so excited. He was going on to the final round of the tournament.

Clemont just hoped that he was ready for it.

...

At the beginning of January that year, the air was absolutely frigid. It wasn't normally this cold, and Clemont really hoped it wasn't an omen of what was to come. He was already nervous about this, his fingers almost hesitating to finish filling out the last of the forms he needed. He wished that their system was a bit different, that Bonnie would have to wait until April to leave just so he could keep his sister close for a little longer. The first of January after their 10th birthday was how it worked in Kalos.

As soon as he hit this button at the end, Dedenne would officially belong to his sister. Nurse Joy would no doubt be presenting her Pokédex to her right now.

"Are you sure, dad?" he asked the man standing close by.

"You aren't?" Meyer responded, sounding rather surprised.

"I...it's just..." he looked down at Dedenne, who stood with them, staring at him expectantly. The

Pokémon knew exactly what was going on that day. "She'll be on her own and I—I promise...I promised mom I'd watch over her and protect her." Clemont looked down.

He didn't talk about his mother, Lana Liscio, often. Sometimes he found it hard to picture what she looked like, and hearing her voice was a struggle. He knew that both him and Bonnie resembled their mother, he knew she had been a highly intelligent woman who brimmed with kindness and a love of adventure. He knew that his most prominent memories of her were in the hospital as her life ended, and that wasn't okay.

So he held onto the promise he made his mother with everything that he had, and now it felt like letting Bonnie go on her own was going against that.

Meyer put a hand on his shoulder. "I am so proud of you, and your mother would be too. You helped raise your sister into an amazing person, and that's how you kept your promise, by making sure that Bonnie can get by on her own. She'll be okay."

"You're...still proud of me?" Clemont asked, blinking his eyes rapidly. "Even if I'm taking time away from the gym?"

Meyer sighed. "Son, if you don't want to be a Gym Leader at all, and want to pursue a different dream, I would still be just as proud of you. I'm proud of the person you've become."

Clemont smiled, and pressed the button, officially transferring Dedenne to Bonnie. He looked at the Pokémon and held out a Pokéball. "I guess we should get you to Bonnie, huh?"

"Denne!" The Pokémon agreed happily, tapping the Pokéball and being pulled inside.

Though still nervous about the future, Clemont couldn't help but laugh and smile at Bonnie's excitement, especially when she thanked him.

"There's no need to thank me," he assured her, his father's words going through his mind. "I know that you'll be great. You've always made us all proud. Me, dad, *and* mom."

Bonnie looked up at him with startled eyes. "You think mom would be proud of me?"

He thought about what he remembered of their mother. He thought about what their father said. He thought about the promise he made.

"I know she would be. Without question."

Bonnie smiled brightly as she hugged him, and he realized that as much as he needed to hear the words, she needed it too. He hugged her back, reminding himself that it wasn't going to be goodbye when she left, just a see you later.



Chapter End Notes

I got a lot of comments on ffn on my choice for career with Cilan since it's neither gym leader nor connoisseur. I made a post about it on my tumblr (check my tryc tags if you're looking because my tumblr is a mess), but it all ends up coming down to me not really feeling the connoisseur thing, and working in elements from the games (BW2 in this case).

Also, a lot of these characters have drastically changed directly because of WTWE. A lot of them want distance from the Pokemon League. They want something consistent and stable. It really depends on the individual.

Great asked why does it need to be a Pokemon League approved therapist that they're talking to. That's an excellent question! It's because their adventure is actually classified information now. Sure, therapists aren't supposed to say anything their clients tell them, but this is just doubling down on it. They're a part of the system, they're approved by the guys in charge (Champions, Red). They were told the bare basics at first to know a bit of the trauma the kids might have, but of course they're professionals and don't let that cloud their judgement ahead of time.

I think that's all for now!

Til next time,

Written by Skylight Sparkle

Edited by EchdinaPower

Dawn

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Staring at herself in the mirror, Dawn ran her fingers through her hair, finding it a little bit off that it ended so soon. Her blue hair had once gone down her back, close to her waist at its longest point. It became a bother to wash and brush though, so off it came, only to her shoulders now.

She smiled at her reflection. She was a bit curious about what the others would say when she met up with them in Kanto, but at the same time, she didn't particularly care. She liked her new hair style, and that's what mattered.

"Dawn!" she heard Zoey yell from downstairs. "Your mom said to hurry up or you're going to miss your flight!" Her friend had been visiting, and though invited, she wasn't going over to Kanto, instead heading up to Snowpoint to watch everything with Candice.

"Give me a minute!" Dawn yelled back. She raised both of her hands up, and froze, her smile vanishing as she stared at her reflection. Her dark blue eyes were locked onto her hands with their pink, splotchy skin that was raised in some places on the inside of her palms. When her hand was in her hair, she had almost forgotten about it, but sometimes she couldn't help but stare at the ugly scars that marred her skin.

Frowning, Dawn quickly grabbed her white and pink gloves, slipping them on and then finishing putting her golden, star clips in her hair. She stood up and sighed, staring down at her hands again.

"Dawn wha—?" Zoey cut off her question as she peered into the room.

The blue-haired girl jumped and stared at her friend. "It's nothing, don't worry."

"Dawn..."

With a smile that didn't quite meet her eyes, Dawn shook her head. "No need to worry! Come on, I have a plane to catch."

...

There were advantages and disadvantages for being so tiny. The disadvantage was trying to see over crowds and grabbing things in high places. The advantage was that she could slip around fairly unnoticed.

That was why no one noticed her slip into the kitchen in the cottage that some of them were staying at (there were simply too many of them to put in one) in Trainer's Village outside the Pokémon League. She had been planning on sneaking a snack before lunch, but now that she was hidden in the corner of the kitchen, she had to figure out how to get by Brock, Cilan, *and* Delia. She pouted a bit, backing up to the hall and glancing at the small living room to see if there was anything in there that she could use as a distraction. Instead, what she found was something to distract herself.

Ash was sitting on the edge of the couch, a serious expression on his face as he watched the television. Not even Pikachu was with him, which was odd in and of itself. Wasn't he supposed to be celebrating his latest win?

At first, Dawn considered tip-toeing over to startle him, but realized with a pout that the attempt

would be useless. He would know she was coming even if she was super quiet.

Instead, she eyed him for a moment. She had known him for years, and could tell that he was stressed and tense. She *knew* her brother, and knew something was bothering him.

"Ash?" It startled her that she seemed to startle him. He jumped and stared at her with wide eyes.

"You nearly gave me a heart attack," he said, scowling at her, though there was no real anger behind the expression.

"What are you watching?" She walked forward and peered over her shoulder. It took her a moment to realize what she was looking at, before she realized it was the results from the other battle today. The winner would be the person that he would be battling in the championship round tomorrow.

Dawn's lips parted in shock when she recognized who it was, her eyes going wide. "Tobias."

"Tobias," Ash repeated glumly.

She was about to ask why it put him off so much, because he was a great trainer, but then it hit her. They both knew that Tobias was already a Pokémon Master, and though they weren't forbidden from competing in tournaments, nowhere was it listed that he was a Master. There was a very good reason why Tobias would be there hidden in plain sight, a reason that connected the two of them by blood.

"You think Red did this on purpose." Dawn didn't bother twisting it to a question, knowing very well what was going on in the young man's head.

"Of course he did," Ash all but spat, clearly upset by this. "I thought...you know what, I shouldn't even be surprised." He stood up, brown eyes narrowed angrily. "Sorry Dawn, I need to go clear my head for a bit." With that he left the room, and a slam of the front door told her that he had gone outside.

"What was that?" Delia asked, looking towards the door with concern.

"Ash is a bit upset," Dawn admitted to her. "He has to face Tobias tomorrow in the finals."

"Wasn't he the one from Sinnoh?" Delia asked curiously. The sound of chopping and cooking from the kitchen stopped.

"He was the League Sweeper that took Ash out," Brock said with a frown.

"Ash thinks Red did it on purpose again," Dawn admitted.

Brock and Cilan looked at each other with concern and Delia pursed her lips slightly. She hummed slightly and said, "He's afraid."

"Ash? I didn't get that impression."

"No. Red," Delia said. "He's afraid that Ash is going to beat Lance this time, which will upset the way things work in Kanto right now. He's not wrong to worry, given how everything is at the moment. There will never be a good time for someone new to step up though, so any excuse about that is...well...inexcusable. Even more, he's afraid that Ash is going to beat *him*."

"Red's afraid of Ash?" Dawn repeated, still unimpressed with her biological father no matter his

motives. "Are you sure?"

"Red didn't change that much over the years," Mrs. Ketchum said as she retreated back to the kitchen. "I knew him then, and I know him now. He's afraid." A proud smile flittered across her face. "And he has every right to be." She looked back at Dawn. "Sweetie, could you send Misty to go get Ash?"

"Sure!" If any of them could bring Ash's spirits up a bit, it would definitely be the redhead, so Dawn quickly went looking for her.

...

"Your hands seem to be healing quite nicely, Dawn," her therapist noted as she allowed the woman to look at them. "How do you feel?"

"It's not painful to move them anymore," she explained, flexing her fingers. "Though it does get itchy and irritated at times." That was another reason she usually wore gloves. They were special ones that allowed her skin to breathe but also let the proper medicine stay on her hands. She stared at her hands, a familiar feeling welling up within her.

It happened every time they were about to breach the topic of her hands. She had talked about helping in Sinnoh, about everything that they had seen and been through, but she kept how her hands were injured and her relations to Red quiet. More and more though, she wanted to get it out.

She had a feeling that her therapist knew she was still hiding some things, and that was why she hadn't signed off on the forms saying that she was done.

"The actual scars aren't the worst part of this," Dawn blurted out before she realized what she was saying. She paused for a moment before looking up at the therapist. "What kind of father lets this happen to their daughter?"

If the woman, Doctor Hastings, was shocked, she didn't let on. "Your father did this to you?"

Dawn hesitated. She didn't really know what to say. She pictured the man with his raven-black hair, pale skin, and scarlet eyes. Then everything came out like an explosion.

"Yes. No. I mean...Giovanni was holding my hands over Arbok acid to get him to talk but he wouldn't. My brother – who had been stabbed – saved me. Then I pushed him away to save him and ended up falling in it anyway. So maybe it was my clumsiness, maybe it was my brother not being attentive, maybe it was Giovanni who brought the acid, maybe it was him."

She took several deep breaths and then kept ranting.

"What kind of shit person leaves their wife and never meets their son, then runs off and fools around with another woman a few years later and leaves their daughter too? What person tries to block their kid's goal in life just because *they* don't think that he's ready? He didn't even know him! Isn't that an abuse of authority? What kind of person would watch these two kids, ones that he claims he stayed away from to protect them, be threatened and stay silent? I know that it makes sense logically because a hundred lives are worth so much more than two, but still. Why would he do that? Why would Red do that?"

This time, Doctor Hastings did nothing to hide her surprise. "Master Red?"

"Father of the year, right?" Dawn let her tears fall. "Why won't he even talk to either of us about this?"

"Is that what you want? To talk to him?"

"Do you think it'd help?"

Doctor Hastings looked thoughtful. "Confronting the things that bother you can be a very powerful aid in the healing process. Especially if you get some closure from it. It's something to think about."

Confrontation and closure, Dawn thought as the therapist began to ask some questions about some of the other things she mentioned. Maybe she could work with that.

...

Dawn felt like she could barely breathe as she stared at the arena in front of her. They had some of the best seats for the final match of the Indigo League Tournament, but she felt like she couldn't enjoy it. She and all of her friends knew exactly what Ash was up against, and it wasn't a fair fight.

She just wished that the announcer would hurry up and get his spiel over with so the match could start. Looking over at Ash, Dawn felt her nervousness melt away, confusion replacing it. He didn't seem worried at all. Even Pikachu, who was standing at his side, seemed fairly content. It was a little bit of a relief knowing that at least he had Pikachu with him for this round.

Suddenly both of them threw their first Pokéballs up in the air. Dawn visibly flinched when Tobias unleashed his Darkrai. Biting her lip, she looked over at Ash's Pokémon, stared for a moment, and *laughed*.

Ria was staring down the Darkrai like he had personally offended her. She hadn't fought against Tobias last time, but due to shifting some Pokémon around and giving temporary guardian status, she had been allowed to sit with Brock and watch.

"Darkrai, use Dark Pulse!"

Ria looked over her shoulder at Ash, who just lifted his hand slightly. She looked back around, and moved back her leg to brace herself, Ash unconsciously doing the same. She threw out her hand, the Dark Pulse attack slammed into an invisible barrier. Ria was barely knocked backwards as the attack vanished.

Darkrai looked back at his trainer, and Tobias stared, genuinely dumbstruck. Ria and Ash both grinned.

"He's going to *destroy* him," Iris said from somewhere behind her, sounding positively too gleeful about it.

Dawn whole-heartedly agreed.

...

Looking down at the messages on her phone, Dawn bounced her leg nervously. Every once in a while she would look up at people passing by, but quickly looked away to avoid their curious gazes. It was probably strange seeing a young, teenage girl sitting there, but she was on a mission and no amount of judging adult stares would change her mind.

When another set of footsteps reached her ears, she once again looked up. This time, she stood up, facing Champion Lance Grayson as he approached her.

"Ready?" he asked her, not bothering to ask her how she was feeling. Dawn appreciated this, since she felt like she was about to throw up.

"As ready as I'll ever be," she answered.

"If it helps, he doesn't know you're coming," Lance told her as he personally led her through the halls, something that had to be irregular.

"Why?"

"He may have tried to find a way to cancel the meeting. If he doesn't know who's coming, he can't do that." Lance looked around briefly before lowering his voice. "And between you and me, it's better to throw him off a bit. It's just in here." He stopped outside of a rather plain door. It wasn't at all what Dawn was expected.

"No secretary?"

Lance actually snorted. "We're lucky to get him off of that damn mountain a couple times a year as it is, let alone here enough to hire a secretary. If it's too much, just storm out and slam the door."

"Thank you," Dawn said to him, truly appreciating it. When she had gone to Cynthia about asking to set up a meeting, she hadn't expected Lance to jump on the opportunity to help her out too. Knowing that some very important people supported her little mission made her feel a lot better about it.

...

Dawn almost wanted to facepalm when she saw Tobias's next Pokémon after Pikachu took down Latios, and then Lapras finished off Regirock.

Of all the legendary Pokémon to pick, Tobias had a Shaymin.

Misty tensed up beside her, and Dawn put a hand on her shoulder. Ash looked just as unimpressed, calling back his tired Pokémon. That confused Dawn a bit, wondering why he would get out a new Pokémon to tire out instead of Lapras, since she did have a partial type advantage.

Then Dawn saw exactly why, and burst out laughing. Charizard eyed Shaymin and then turned to look at his trainer. The large Pokémon pointed at the little Pokémon and made a noise, very clearly asking why he was being put up against this thing.

"Wreck 'em," Ash said simply. Charizard shrugged and looked at the Pokémon.

"This is going to be amazing," Leaf whispered from Misty's other side. "And brutal. But mostly amazing."

Dawn was inclined to agree.

...

Taking a deep breath, she opened the door and walked inside, immediately meeting a pair of scarlet eyes that she was pleased to see were rather startled with her sudden appearance.

She closed the door, and made her way to the chair across from his desk, not waiting for an invitation or for him to say anything. "We need to talk." Cynthia had told her to be direct and stern with what she wanted, and that's exactly what she was going to do. "I want some answers."

Pokémon Master Red stared at her with impassive eyes before leaning back in his chair. "You're right, we do."

That threw her off a bit. Dawn expected him to dismiss her immediately. Damn him for getting her off-track. She wet her lips before asking, "Have you been watching any of it? Ash's matches?"

"It's why I'm here," Red admitted.

"To watch and interfere?"

He sighed a bit. "I get the feeling that's not why *you're* currently here? Your brother's final match starts in an hour."

"A match you rigged," she accused, eyes flashing angrily. "Don't lie. He knows it too. It's not what I wanted to talk about but I guess it still kind of applies." She met his gaze, though she wanted to look away. "Do you regret any of it at all? Anything?"

Red was silent, his stare unnerving her more and more. Dawn was glad that he didn't ask for clarification, apparently on the same page as her.

"I don't regret making the choices for the greater good," Red admitted after a moment of silence, "that's not to say they're easy choices to make. They never have been." His gaze finally fell to his desk, and it surprised her a bit that he looked away first. "I hate that I ended up hurting your mother and Ash's mother. I hate that I ended up hurting you and Ash." His eyes fell to her hands, and she could see the question in his eyes.

She took off her gloves and showed him her palms. "Then...why?"

Red grimaced and looked rightfully ashamed of himself. "It's not a straightforward answer, and not one that I'm sure someone your age should hear."

"We went to the end of the world and back," Dawn pointed out. "I'm still a kid, yeah, but I can try to understand. I want to try."

He regarded her carefully and nodded his head. "You heard what happened to Misty's aunt years ago? The aunt she's named after."

"Madame Boss gave the order to kill her to get to you. You were the one that found her."

He nodded. "That wasn't the first or last time they took things from myself and others that opposed them. Madame Boss was a different kind of evil compared to her son. Between the two, I'd rather face him again."

The thought that someone could be worse sent shivers through Dawn's spine.

"Yellow's Pokémon were all killed. Green was pulled through the gutter time and time again until there was very little of what made her Green left until those last few months of her life. Blue, his wife, and sister were killed. Your Misty's parents were killed. It wasn't just them. There were so many others. I couldn't protect anyone, even as I gained more power and made it harder for those who were corrupt to gain power themselves. I owed it to everyone who had lost their lives against these monsters."

He paused for a moment, and Dawn got the impression that he was letting that sink in. She nodded her head to show that she understood, and wanted to know more.

"It was selfish on my part, because Yellow—Delia—just wanted to be free, but I clung to her and she clung to me too. Then she got pregnant with Ash. The entire time, all I could think was that I had no idea how to be someone's father – I never had one myself that I knew – and that others would find out about him and ruin his life before it could begin. So I took steps to make sure that at least he and Delia would be financially secure, it was the least I could do, and I distanced myself from them. No one knew that Jack Ketchum and Red were one and the same, I made sure of it."

"You abandoned them to protect them?" Dawn asked uncertainly. How horribly clichéd. It sounded like something Ash would try to do before everyone else knocked some sense into him and he rightfully listened to them.

It occurred to Dawn that Red didn't have someone like that. Everyone bowed down to his word without question.

"What about me? How did—how did I happen?"

Red regarded her once again, this time carefully choosing his words. "We all do stupid things that we don't mean to, but that doesn't mean the consequences are always bad. I think my stupid actions turned into something pretty good, don't you?" He nodded at her.

For the first time, Dawn felt a little flutter of warmth rush through her. Yes, she was well aware that she was not at all planned, an accident really, but she never let that get to her. Her mother always made sure she knew there were no regrets, and that was what mattered. Though she didn't *really* care about Red's opinion, he didn't sound like he regretted it.

"It was easier to protect you because no one could possibly connect me to your mother. Except for the DNA tests that got us in the end." Red shook his head. "I'm sorry what happened to you. I really am. I'm sorry I let him hurt you." He looked genuinely, honestly ashamed.

Something wasn't really adding up to Dawn. She stared at him with narrowed eyes, noticing that his expression was very much like one she'd seen on Ash's face before. Dear sweet Arceus, they looked a lot alike now that she knew. She saw some of herself in him too, but not nearly as much.

Then it occurred to her what she was missing. What separated him so much from her brother. She wanted to be sure before she accused him though. "How was knocking Ash out of tournaments with League Sweepers protecting him?"

"Because he's a fantastic trainer," Red stated bluntly, leaning forward in his chair. "Even as a child in his first tournament, I realized pretty early on that he was good. Much better than I expected someone his age to be, and he only improved. He probably would have won in Sinnoh if Tobias wasn't sent in."

"He wouldn't have beat any of the Elite Four yet though, so why?"

"The tournament champions get a lot of publicity and attention, and Ash's age actually does stand out even if he doesn't realize it. Lance knew who he was, kept a close eye on him and always had *glowing* things to say about him, planned on recruiting him to be a G-Man some day." Red shook his head. "That's when I saw it. I looked at him, and I saw myself. I knew that others would too."

"So you knocked him out of the tournament before he could get the attention from the wrong people," Dawn concluded.

"You're a smart girl," Red said with a nod of his head. "Even back then, we knew Team Rocket

was up to something, though we had no idea how big it would become by a long shot."

"And now?"

He fell silent, looking at the wall behind her instead of at her. "Right now isn't the time to switch leaders."

Dawn wanted to argue with that. It was a great time to get someone new in there to fix everything. Instead, she focused on something else his statement implied. "Who says he'd beat any of the Elite Four? Or Lance? Or you, for that matter?"

Red's eyes snapped back to her and he raised an eyebrow, a familiar, dry expression on his face. How had no one pieced together the connection between him and Ash before? "If he wins this tournament, he *will* defeat me."

That startled Dawn a lot. There was so much conviction in his voice, and unless she was making it up, she would have sworn she heard a bit of pride.

"He will win, because I see it now. What everyone else has always told me but I ignored. He is like me, but so much more. He has something that I lost a long time ago and could never get back, and he's all the stronger for it. He will win, and he's not ready for what comes with that yet."

Red's eyes turned to the clock. "His match will be starting soon. You should get going."

Dawn slowly stood up, knowing she'd been dismissed, and made her way towards the door, her mind reeling with the info-dump that Red had given her.

"And Dawn?" She turned around to look at him. "None of this excuses my actions. I know that and accept it. I will never ask for forgiveness, but I can admit my biggest mistake that has become abundantly clear to me recently."

"What's that?"

"Not getting to know the two of you for who you are."

Those words echoed in Dawn's mind as she made her way through the stadium to find her friends again. She felt so much lighter now that she had some answers, things that she could actually understand. Though she couldn't imagine letting a friend be hurt or die, even to save thousands of other people she didn't know, she understood it. She understood that it didn't come from contempt.

She finally caught sight of her friends and started to rush towards them. As she did, it occurred to her where the choice came from, what he was missing that Ash had that would let him win. He had closed his heart off a long time ago from others.

Dawn had to fight away her tears so no one would notice them. She understood. Master Red wasn't an evil person, he wasn't even a bad person. He was alone, closed off, and deadly afraid to let others in after losing so much.

She didn't hate him anymore. No, instead, she felt sorry for him.

...

Dawn held her breath and closed her eyes as dust exploded around the stadium. After a moment, and some confused murmuring, she slowly blinked open her eyes, only to see a dusty haze still around them.

The entire stadium suddenly seemed to enter a void where no one could breathe and not a sound could be heard. Dawn could hear her own heart beating over the tense silence, and she only broke her gaze with the dust cloud when Misty grabbed her hand. The redhead wasn't even looking at her, but that suited her just fine. She looked back, squeezing the young woman's hand in return. Though all of their friends would help to pick up the pieces if Ash lost, it would largely end up coming down to the two of them and Delia.

"Come on," Dawn muttered under her breath. "Come on." She squinted and leaned forward as a shape started to manifest before her.

The shape of Goodra with Zapdos pinned to the ground, the electric-type legendary still struggling a bit before falling unconscious.

Dawn wasn't sure who screamed first, her or Misty, or perhaps the two of them had screamed together, but it didn't matter, since everyone started screaming and cheering loudly.

"Zapdos is unable to battle! Goodra wins the match!" The referee announced. "Ash Ketchum wins the battle!"

"There you have it, folks!" The announcer boomed over the speakers. "This year's Indigo League Tournament Champion is Ash Ketchum from Pallet Town!"

A huge smile split on Ash's face as he hurried towards Goodra, carrying a tired Pikachu in his arms. Goodra hugged him tightly, despite being so exhausted, lifting him off the ground much to everyone's amusement.

Dawn watched as Ash looked towards Tobias, who, instead of stopping halfway across the field, kept coming over to him. He held out his hand, which Ash shook, albeit, a bit reluctantly. Tobias said something quietly, and it seemed to startle him, before he smiled broadly and nodded.

Ash turned to look at them, and waved wildly, motioning for them to come over. Dawn wasn't sure if it was allowed, but Misty and Brock were quick to hop over the railing in front of them, hurrying over to him.

In retrospect, it was lucky that the viewers in the stadium didn't think they were allowed to rush the arena or something, since so many of them went out to surround Ash. Misty and Brock each held up one of Ash's hands, while May held onto Pikachu and Iris whispered to Goodra.

The excitement in the air was palpable as they all cheered loudly. Dawn looked around at the crowd, her heart swelling when she saw just how many people had been rooting for her brother.

"Ash?" Misty asked, sounding a bit concerned. Dawn looked around in time to see Ash glaring at something high up in the stadium, but he quickly broke the hostile staring match at her question. He just smiled and shook his head.

She looked up, following where his gaze had been. It took her a moment to see what had distracted him, but she wasn't really surprised.

Her eyes met Red's, and he nodded at her as he turned to walk away.

Dawn looked back at Ash, excitement bubbling up in her as she remembered what Red had told her. If Ash won the tournament, he would end up beating the Master.

The thought of that energized her, and Dawn felt like she could do anything. Seeing a friend's dream coming true was very inspiring, after all. It made her more confident, less afraid. Or maybe

that was her talk with Red.

It didn't really matter. All that did was that Dawn was excited to see what the future had in store.



Chapter End Notes

I know Dawn's chapter was a little different than the others. Instead of skipping through many scenes, it kept going back and forth between two. This was always the plan for her. It was also always the plan for Tobias to face Ash at the end of the tournament, and for this to be Dawn's chapters. Given what happened to her, her conversation with Red was one of THE most important things for her when it comes to healing.

Til next time,

Written by Skylight Sparkle

Edited by EchidnaPower

Serena

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

There was something otherworldly about seeing yourself on television, and that was something Serena was slowly getting used to. On the one hand, the attention was really strange and surreal. On the other, she *thrived* on it.

She stared at herself, answering the questions the interviewer asked her with confidence and poise, makeup, hair and clothing the image of perfection. It was expected, really. She was the new Kalos Queen after all.

The thought still filled her stomach with fluttering Vivillon. When she won against Aria, Serena had been taken completely by surprise. Even more by the fact that Aria quickly turned around and treated her like a true friend, an equal, almost immediately. There was no questioning, no hesitation. She was proud to hand the crown over, even though she would always be a Kalos Queen.

The thing was, now that she had the crown, Serena wasn't sure that she wanted it.

She stared at herself on the screen, and slowly placed her hand on the remote to turn it off, a frown marring her features.

She sighed and pulled her knees up to her chest, not quite sure where this feeling was coming from. For a moment, she thought about calling her mother and talking to her about it, but shrugged that thought off. She could just hear her mother asking her if she was quitting this too.

That wasn't it though. She *loved* performing, but she wasn't sure if it was what she wanted to do anymore. It wasn't like she wanted to quit, she just felt like she should be doing something more.

A hand landed on her shoulder, causing Serena to squeak and jump. She looked over her shoulder, breath coming out in a sigh of relief. "Thank you, Shauna! I think I only had ten heart attacks this time."

Shauna laughed and hopped over the back of the couch, landing beside her. "What's up? I thought you'd still be over the moon about being the Queen. It was what you wanted, right?"

"Of course it was!" Serena assured her quickly. Shauna was the one that had got her into performing, after all. She didn't want her girlfriend to think that she wasn't interested in it after becoming Queen. "I just...I don't know...it's like I want more, you know?" She shook her head. "I know it doesn't make sense. I'm the *KalosQueen*. People really do take me seriously now. I can really promote helping others and if I go to help they'll film me and that's good promotion too."

"You've been saying that's what you wanted to do for a while now," Shauna said with a nod.

"I have been." She worried her bottom lip with her teeth. "I thought I had things figured out, but I guess I'm just a little too selfish."

"So what?" Shauna said, startling Serena slightly. "A lot has changed and we all know it. A lot of things are going to keep on changing. I think we all have the right to be a little selfish too. Grab some things that are important to us and not let go. Doesn't mean we can't help others in the meantime too."

"That's a nice thought...but I just keep thinking. Look at some of my friends. Look at Ash and how much he tries to help—" Shauna snorted. "What? He does!"

"Oh he does alright," Shauna agreed with a wave of her hand. "But he's also got a girlfriend he's pretty head-over-heels for, and he's chasing a goal that, while helping others, is for himself too. That's what I mean. You're allowed to just do things for yourself. Hell, you can use your Kalos Queen title to do something else. Not everyone stays active on the circuit like Aria did."

"Yashino expects me too. She always tells me I'm the next Aria."

Shauna scowled lightly before shaking her head and grabbing Serena's hands. "No. You're *Serena*, not Aria. Be who you want to be." She paused. "Besides, I like Serena way more than Aria. Like... way more."

Serena stared at her before laughing. She smiled warmly as Shauna, pulling her forward with her hands to kiss her.

...

Serena had never seen an arena quite like this. There were many strange things about it, starting from the fact that not only were the stands small, but they were behind a one-way window. They could see down, but anyone in the arena would only see brick – or whatever

The arena itself was fairly standard, but the room was decorated to look almost like a forest with thick trees around the edges.

"I don't get it," she voiced as they got comfortable. "Why don't they want Ash to see us during the battle?"

"It's a leftover from the way the league used to work," Brock explained, flipping through a book he had purchased, though Serena got the distinct feeling that he didn't need it to tell this story. "Master Red changed the league into what it is now—"

"To make sure that it was much harder for someone say from Team Rocket to get in and become Champion," Dawn interrupted, her cheeks going pink when everyone looked at her. "Sorry."

"...Right," Brock said slowly, staring at her oddly. "Anyway, before that, you just had to get the eight badges from Kanto, since there were only eight gyms at that point, and then you could challenge the Elite Four as much as you wanted. The trick was that you had to defeat *all* of them and then the Champion without any rest. It was just one battle to the next. They didn't want anyone to come in and watch the battles to try and figure out the strategies of the Elite Four. Now it kind of enforces the idea that even if there are others cheering you on, it all comes down to you and your Pokémon."

"That's amazing, really," Max said as he leaned forward to get a closer look. A young woman with wavy, pure white hair, milky skin, and striking red eyes came out of the door at one end. "I don't recognize her."

"Some people had to be replaced after Team Rocket took down the league," Misty said bluntly. Serena winced slightly at her words, understanding that she meant that some people had died.

"So, who is she?" Serena wondered aloud, looking around at the others.

"According to this," Brock held up the little book, "her name is Piper and she specializes in Normal-Types. Apparently she's been working with developing different types of air travel along

with some people from other regions and—"

He cut himself off as Pikachu, who had been silently sitting with Bonnie, suddenly perked up and moved forward to get a better seat. "Pikapi!"

Everyone looked down to see Ash enter the room. Serena had to admit, it was impressive how he didn't look interested in the least.

"Welcome to your first Elite Four challenge," Piper said, raising a hand up towards him in greeting. "I'm Piper."

Ash blinked, looking a bit perplexed. "Where's the referee?"

Piper laughed, and it amazed Serena just how clearly they could hear them. There must have been some form of speaker system set up.

"A real Master doesn't need a referee," she explained. "We both have witnesses here, even if you can't see it – so that accountability is still there. The thing is, we need to be able to assess ourselves whether we win or lose. It's a small thing that makes us the best." She picked a Pokéball from her belt, spinning it on her finger. "Tell me, Ash, are you ready to prove if you're one of the best?"

He grinned, looking both determined and excited. "You bet I am."

"Good. The rules are simple: it's a six-on-six match. If your Pokémon faints, you lose. The last Pokémon standing is the winner. You are allowed to switch your Pokémon in and out of battle. Understand?"

"Yes."

"Excellent." She was about to toss her Pokéball up into the air, but stopped, her cheeks going bright red. "Oops! I forgot!"

Ash tilted his head. "Forgot?"

She reached into her pocket and pulled out a cue card, reading over it and mumbling to herself.

"What's she doing?" Serena asked.

"I'm not sure even she knows," Leaf spoke up with a shrug.

"Right! Sorry! I've been a Master for a while but this is my first battle as an Elite," Piper explained almost bashfully. "We're supposed to introduce ourselves properly, which I did not do." She cleared her throat. "Right. Welcome to the Pokémon League! I am Piper of the Elite Four! People often doubt the strength of normal-types, and if you do that, you won't stand a chance against my Pokémon. Are you ready?"

Ash blinked at her, clearly amused, but nodded his head.

"Excellent." She tossed her Pokéball up into the air. "Let's go, Pidgeot!"

"Go, Muk!" The large sludge Pokémon stretched out and eyed the bird, an eerie grin appearing on his face.

Serena leaned forward, excited to see her first ever match against an Elite.

...

"I've been lying to a lot of people," Serena told the therapist sitting on the couch across from her. The man looked up at her with curious eyes, silently prodding her to keep talking. He was a rather quiet man, only asking questions or giving advice when he felt it was necessary. He preferred to let her take the reins in the conversation.

Clearing her throat a bit, Serena said, "It's just...I've been telling people that I'm not sure what I want to do now that I'm the Kalos Queen, but I actually do know. It just seems so selfish."

"Perhaps you can tell me what it is," he suggested.

"I've been thinking of helping people like me, you know, performers, by making new and cute clothes amongst other things. Fashion design, styling, things like that. It just seems so...normal and plain though. It wasn't at all what I thought I wanted to begin with, and it's not helping the world or anything."

"Not everything has to," he pointed out to her after a moment of silence. "You told me your story, and it's easy to understand why you think you'd have to spend the rest of your life actively helping those in need, but in reality, you don't. If you like designing clothes, helping young girls and women with performances in that way, then you should do it."

"Maybe, but my mom will probably get on me, claiming I'm just going to change my mind again if I take classes on fashion design and try to get an internship or something."

He shook his head. "You are allowed to change your mind, young lady. You are allowed to choose something simple and for yourself."

This was something that they had talked about before, when they touched on her outlook on relationships, and how she was allowed to be upset that her first love didn't love her back, and how she was allowed to have fun and not think that she needed to have a serious relationship.

"Isn't it what you fought for so hard?" he asked her suddenly.

"What?"

"The freedom to choose and be who you want to be. Isn't that one of the reasons you fought so hard to make the world a better place?"

That statement startled her, but Serena realized it was true. It didn't quite settle exactly right in her head though. Surely there was something that she needed to do, and such a selfish idea wouldn't actually end up well.

It usually didn't with her.

...

Serena woke up with a sore, dry throat and with tears in her eyes. There were hands shaking her shoulders, causing her to blink several times as the person above her floated in and out of focus until she found herself looking into a pair of very worried green eyes.

An apology was on her lips, but then she realized that the green eyes weren't right. They weren't a pale minty colour only made brighter by dark skin. These ones were the colour of the sea.

"Are you okay?" Misty's voice pierced her thoughts, and Serena suddenly remembered that she wasn't back at home with Shauna. She was sleeping in one of the spare rooms in Misty's house.

"I woke up screaming, didn't I?" Serena mumbled out as she pushed herself up into a sitting position. At Misty's nod, she groaned, cheeks heating from embarrassment. "Sorry."

"You don't need to apologize for that," the redhead assured her. "You want to talk about it?"

She hesitated and looked down. "I don't want to freak anyone out again."

Misty looked like she was about to question something else, but instead made herself comfortable on the bed and said, "Serena, it's me. Whatever your nightmares are will not be the worst thing I've seen or heard, right? It happens to me too, you know. That's why I woke you up, because I know it sucks when someone doesn't. When Ash is here, he usually does, but...well...he's not always here."

"That's right, you would understand," Serena agreed. With how peaceful it was in Kalos, and how she was always surrounded by people who were genuinely okay, she sometimes forgot that she wasn't alone in her nightmares. It was easy to remember with Clemont and even Bonnie (though Clemont had been through everything with her, unlike his sister), but she travelled more often than she was with them. "I just...don't know where to begin."

"I have nightmares about dying," Misty said after a moment of silence. "Yeah, I have nightmares of the world ending, of the people I love dying, but it's more often myself I see." She ran a hand over her scar. "It was terrifying."

Serena looked down. "Sometimes I see myself letting May fall with Drew. Sometimes it's the prison. Sometimes it's watching that man fall at the Tree of Beginning. Most of the time it's me almost falling."

"I talked to my therapist about this," Misty said, "and she assures me that it's completely normal and actually really healthy to be afraid of your own mortality. There's no need to be ashamed about worrying for your own life, especially if you almost lost it once." She shifted a bit on the side of the bed, and Serena moved over some, allowing the other young woman to get comfortable. "She encouraged me to live for myself. To do the things I wanted to do while holding my friends close, and that's what I'm going to do." Her eyes narrowed fiercely. "I *want* to help the gym and Cerulean, but I want to keep bettering myself too. I want to make sure I'll have a stable future for myself and my family."

Serena was silent as she thought about that. She bit her lip and said, "How do you talk about that so calmly?"

"Hmm?"

"The future," the blonde clarified. "You talk about having a stable future and a family so easily? Like it's not an absolutely huge deal."

Misty shrugged. "It *is* a huge deal, but it just *is* easy to talk about. It's not like Ash is going anywhere, and it's something we both want in the future sometime."

"That's what I mean!" Serena threw her arms in the air dramatically, almost causing Misty to fall off the side of the bed. "You sound so sure and serious about it. I find it...weird. I can start picturing what I'd like to do as a career and how to get there, but the whole family thing, the thought of a relationship that serious right now is...mindboggling." She shook her head. "I just want to have fun. I can't imagine knowing right now that I'm going to settle down with Shauna or anything. I just want to have fun."

Misty shifted away from her, frowning heavily. When she spoke, she sounded a bit offended. "I *do* have fun. Being in a serious relationship with someone for a long time doesn't mean we don't have fun anymore." She calmed down a little bit and quickly shifted the topic a bit. "I didn't know you were dating someone."

Serena grabbed her pillow and hugged it to her chest, a smile spreading across her lips. "Yeah. Shauna's amazing. I didn't expect...well...I didn't expect to feel this way because it was always boys before but..."

Misty shrugged. "You do you." She paused for a moment, going back to something she had noticed earlier. "Shauna's who you freaked out before, with your nightmare, isn't she?"

She blinked a few times. "Yeah. She's great, but she doesn't get it. I think it freaks her out – you know – that I have such bad nightmares and that I go to a therapist and everything...that I'm not okay. I guess that's one way you are lucky, that Ash gets it."

Misty thought for a moment, looking a bit unsure of herself. "I'm sure if you explained she'd get it. But only if you want to." She hesitated again. "I think I get what you mean about not *knowing* what you want from your future, partner-wise at least. You don't have to think 'I want to be with this person forever', just focus on right now."

The two of them fell into silence, before Serena asked, "What's it like? Looking at someone and knowing that you love them so much that it's *it* for you? When did you realize it?"

A soft smile appeared on her face, and Misty looked up and out the window at the starry sky. "I don't think there was ever one big moment, honestly. I can't remember one. Things just kept going and seemed to get stronger even through the bad times. I don't remember when I started picturing the future, but I do know that it doesn't make me afraid. It makes me feel warm, and excited."

Serena stared, and couldn't help but smile along with Misty. She looked so happy and at peace with herself, which was a stark difference from their time travelling. She couldn't help but notice something about what Misty said though. "Shauna doesn't make me feel like that when I think of the future."

That brought the other girl back to reality. Misty sighed and put a hand on her shoulder. "That doesn't mean that what you have right now is any less important."

Later on Serena would realize how strange and random this conversation with Misty had been, but she still felt thankful for it. "Thank you, Misty."

...

"Kick her ass, Ash!"

"Bonnie!"

Serena laughed at Bonnie's unapologetic expression, right there with the girl. She was on the edge of her seat (quite literally), and found that she could only tear her gaze from the battle below for short periods of time.

There was something completely different about this one in comparison to the battles Ash fought in the Indigo Conference a few weeks prior. This woman, Piper, had a finesse to her that none of his other opponents had.

She grimaced as Piper's Girafarig slammed Ash's Hawlucha into the window with some sort of

psychic attack. It was actually really difficult to keep up with what exactly the Pokémon were supposed to be doing, since everything was happening so rapidly.

Hawlucha pushed off the window, spinning through the air and slamming his foot into Girafarig. Yet, despite both of these incidents, both trainers still seemed enthusiastic about the entire thing.

Dust flew through the air as attacks met, and Serena watched as Ash's hat flew off, vanishing somewhere in the decorative trees.

"Another one," Delia Ketchum muttered from where she was sitting. "Honestly, that boy."

Serena snorted, causing Bonnie to burst out into laughter.

...

Clapping her hands together, Serena called out, "Come on, Clemont, show me!"

"It looks bad."

"It does not."

"You haven't seen it yet."

"Come out and show me. It's why I'm here, right?"

Silence answered her, and Serena knew that she had won. She sat up a little straighter as Clemont peeked his head around the corner, his cheeks pink. She smiled at him, and he slowly walked in.

She clapped her hands together. "Oh I love it! That jacket and hat are perfect to sell in your gym in the fall!" She stood up and walked around him. "I really like the blue. It's really nice! It looks really nice on you too."

He laughed awkwardly, rubbing the back of his head. "Thanks. So this one is a yes?"

"Absolutely!" she gushed. "Not that there was any doubt about it, but it's always nice to see a sample of it." She touched the stitching of the gym badge that was on it. "I know it's up to you, and not me, but you should get these."

"I asked you for your help because you're so much better at this than I am," Clemont assured her. "If you say this one, I'll go with this. Fashion's not really my thing. Besides, you're going to be a world famous fashion designer. Someday I'll have to pay for you to help me like this."

Serena laughed a bit, feeling her heart jump a bit at the confidence he had in her. Her phone beeped, and she quickly grabbed it off of the coffee table, scowling when she saw what was on it, and letting it drop.

Clemont hesitated before asking, "Shauna again?" Serena didn't answer him, choosing to sit on the couch again instead, and that was just as telling as giving an actual answer. "You have to talk to her eventually."

Her gaze snapped up to him, and he recoiled slightly. "I don't have to do *anything* I don't want to do."

"...No, I suppose not," he conceded, sitting beside her. "But you will eventually, won't you?"

"What's the point?" she replied glumly. "After what happened I've already lost her."

"Maybe not as a friend though," he pointed out. "Maybe not as anything else if you try."

"Well I don't want to try!" Serena snapped, and then sighed. "Sorry. You didn't do anything wrong. It was just...she didn't understand. She was too scared." She blinked her eyes rapidly. "I wish she had understood, so much."

Clemont hesitated before reaching out and brushing away the tears that fell. "It's okay to—" he cut himself off with a squeak and quickly pulled his hand back.

Serena stared at him oddly. "It's okay. You weren't going past any boundaries." That was something she liked about Clemont. He never assumed that just because they were friends, that it was okay to get in her personal space without permission. The only exceptions were when he was super excited about something, or was trying to protect her.

"Sorry."

"You have nothing to apologize about."

"Um, well, before I came in here I was kind of fiddling with something in the hall cause I was nervous and it helps and..." he trailed off and held up his hand that had a bit of smeared oil on it.

Serena didn't get it at first before she slowly raised a hand to her face, and touched her cheek. She squawked just like he had before when she saw the black oil on her fingers.

"For what it's worth, you make it look good?" Clemont said, clearly trying to spin things in a good light since she was already feeling a bit down.

Once again, she stared at him, before bursting into peals of laughter. She leaned forward, resting her forehead on his shoulders as she laughed loudly. "Thank you."

He blinked. "For what?"

"The compliment. For always welcoming me here." She smiled broadly as she sat back up straight. "For always making me feel happy and safe."

Clearly taken back, it took him a moment to respond. When he did, Clemont did it with a smile. "That's not a problem. We're friends, right? Of course I'll always be here to help!"

Despite a bit of lingering sadness from her current issues with Shauna, Serena couldn't help but feel warm and happy. The thought of her future, and knowing that she could always come to Clemont when she needed him made her smile broadly. She clapped her hands together. "Okay, you go try the winter suit and beanie now."

Clemont sighed and got up, very slowly walking out of the room to find the winter samples that were sent to them.

Serena smiled brightly, and reached out to the coffee table, where her sketchbook sat the entire time. She grabbed it, and giggled a bit when she accidentally smeared a bit of oil on it.

She really loved being there, and felt more than just a little happy. As she thought about that, her smile slowly started to fade, her eyes going wide.

Her head snapped around, and she looked at the door Clemont had left through with wide eyes. Her mouth opened and closed for a moment, brow furrowing with confusion.

"Oh. That's what she meant."

...

Serena screamed and jumped up from her seat as Goodra stood victorious over Drampa. She knew in the back of her mind that Ash couldn't even hear them, but no one seemed to actually care.

"Well, worst-case scenario, Ash can officially apply to be a Normal Master," Gary joked a bit.

Piper laughed a bit. "My first battle as an Elite, and I lost. That must be a record." She smiled at Ash as she recalled Drampa. "Well done. You're better than I thought! Don't get cocky though, you've only gotten a taste of the power of the Pokémon League."

Ash smiled back at her. "Thank you."

"No, thank *you*." She reached out to shake his hand.

Serena smiled as she watched the exchange, excitement building up in her. He was so close to reaching his dreams now, that *she* could almost taste it. It made her feel like she could do anything, so she couldn't even imagine what Ash was actually feeling.

She couldn't wait to see what the future brought next.



Chapter End Notes

If you have any questions, don't hesitate to ask on here or tumblr.

Til next time,

Written by Skylight Sparkle

Edited by EchidnaPower

Leaf

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Leaf refused to look at the man sitting before her. Instead, her dusty-brown eyes focused on the bland wall behind him. She sat upright and stiff in her otherwise comfortable chair, arms crossed and lips set in a straight line. She had been like that for quite a while.

The man looked down at his papers, and said, "Miss Green, I am here to *help* you. I'm not trying to control or hurt you in any way, shape, or form."

"Well I don't want to be here," she said sharply, still not looking at him. "We're just wasting each other's time."

"Many things happened to you," he pointed out. "Therapy is a good thing to help you work out your problems."

"I don't want *your* help." She glared at him heatedly.

He shook his head. "You're going to have to talk to someone." His voice was surprisingly harsh, but it really wasn't a surprise. "If you don't, your mind is going to eat you alive."

Leaf thought about that. "I won't let it."

He smiled at her humorlessly. "A lot of people say that. Unfortunately, stubbornness alone isn't enough, Miss Green."

She looked away once again. Leaf didn't care what he had to say. She had been fine on her own for a long time, and though she appreciated her friends greatly, she didn't need any help when it came to this.

...

Leaf's brown eyes swept over the battlefield, shifting from the small shrubs that lined the sides, to the grass, to the cobblestone arena itself. She bit her lip before saying, "That's a bit odd."

Gary shifted a bit and glanced at her. "What is?"

"Two things, actually. Firstly, Koga's here. I thought he was over in Johto." Before she could get the second thing out, Gary shared his two cents with her.

"I heard rumours that he wanted to be in Kanto in the first place," he said with a careless shrug, clearly not really caring if they were true or not. "No one was leaving at the time, so he went to Johto instead. He certainly was an opportunist to get here, wasn't he?"

She snorted and held up two fingers. "Second thing then. I'm surprised he was allowed to plant those here. The leaves themselves can cause a rash if touched, and are poisoned if ingested. You'd think that wouldn't be allowed."

"This is the Pokémon League." They looked over to Clemont, who was eyeing the field skeptically. "The rules aren't exactly the same."

"That's putting it mildly," Leaf agreed with him, shifting so she was sitting sideways in her seat so

that she could see him and Gary at the same time. She was really grateful that these chairs were much more comfortable than the general stands in most arenas. "Ash will have to be careful."

"He's faced off against Koga himself before," Brock pointed out. "Most people these days face Janine, and Aya on occasion. I'm sure Ash can do it."

"I'm not doubting Ash's abilities." Leaf rolled her eyes, and felt annoyed that Brock would even inadvertently imply that's what she was questioning. She was the one that had been training with him almost daily in the lead-up to his Elite Four Challenge. "What I mean is that even if he's the better battler, and poison can be easy to beat if you're not careful, one little slip could cost you. It's tricky that way."

"Oh!" Dawn leaned forward from where she was sitting. "I just remembered! You were studying poisons when we first met you, weren't you? For the Pokédex, right?" She grinned. "That was such a long time ago."

Leaf laughed slightly and looked down as Koga cleared his throat, the noise booming even in their private box to watch the match. Pikachu shifted in his spot on Misty's lap, watching his trainer eagerly.

"Fwahahahaha!" They all jumped. "I am Koga of the Elite Four!" He held his hands in the air. "I live in shadows, a ninja! My intricate style will confound and destroy you! Fwahahahaha! Pokémon are not merely about brute force—you shall see soon enough!"

Ash stared at him for a moment before looking up at where he must have known they were sitting, a look of disdain on his face before turning back to his opponent. Both selected a Pokéball and threw them into the air, revealing Ash's Donphan and Koga's Ariados.

"So like...do you think that those speeches are required?" Bonnie asked curiously. "Cause Piper said she forgot something yesterday then said her own intro too."

"Probably." Leaf agreed. She paused and thought. "I really hope that's the first thing Ash gets rid of when he becomes the Champion."

...

Amanda Green. 1977 – 2017. Only 40 years old when she had passed away.

40 was such a strange number to Leaf. It seemed so far away – over a lifetime – but at the same time, she knew it was so *young*. Then again, she knew that most people had been surprised her mother lived as long as she had.

She stared at the tombstone in front of her, slowly reaching up and running her fingers along the grooves that carved out her mother's name. This rock was the only proof that her mother existed at all.

Her hand dropped down onto her lap, and Leaf bit her lip. She wasn't quite sure what she was supposed to do now. This was her first time visiting her mother's grave alone, and every other time, she had simply placed flowers and stared at it for a few moments before moving on. Others asked her if she wanted to say a few words, but she never really knew what to make of that. What did it matter if she talked to a stone? It wasn't like her mother would hear her.

Yet, she had the urge to speak. To say things to the woman that she had never said before, to try and actually work things out and understand. Once again though, her mother had deprived her of something that would bring her a bit of peace. It was something the woman had been so good at,

that apparently it transcended into death.

Leaf didn't understand why her eyes were starting to burn and her vision became blurry. She had already made her peace with her mother's memory, and decided that it was time to just move on. So why did it feel like something was squeezing her chest?

A warm hand gently touched her shoulder, causing her to jump a bit. Leaf looked around, meeting Delia Ketchum's warm eyes. The woman smiled at her, but didn't say anything, instead shifting so that she was kneeling beside her.

A sob broke out of Leaf's lips, and she found herself leaning into the woman's warm embrace.

...

Leaf collapsed to her knees, cheeks red as sweat slid down her temple. She grumbled to herself, digging in the pocket of her shorts and pulling out an elastic, tugging her short hair up into a ponytail as best as she could.

Beside her, Ash snorted with amusement, his eyes trailing on her tiny ponytail. She nudged him, and he ended up toppling over sideways, still seemingly amused. Pikachu poked him for good measure.

"Why did I think this was a good idea?" she asked him as she flopped down beside him the rest of the way, staring up at the sky.

"You're a good friend who wants to help me win the Indigo League so I can try to fix the mess our parents made?" Though it should have been a statement, he made it sound more like a question.

"Yes, but that was *before* I knew exactly what your definition of training meant." It didn't just mean Pokémon battles and giving them advice. Ash got right in the midst of it. If they needed to run, he needed to run. If they were working on strength training or stamina, so was he.

Despite her complaining, Leaf had to really admire that. It really did differentiate him from so many others.

Ash didn't say anything to that, simply shrugging, throwing one arm over his eyes to block out the sun.

Leaf looked over as Espeon nuzzled herself into her side, curling up for a rest. The rest of their Pokémon were scattered around them haphazardly, but they all deserved a break so she wasn't about to comment.

Instead, she thought back to Ash's earlier statement. "Those assholes really fucked things up, didn't they?"

At first, Leaf thought he wasn't going to respond to that, which she could understand, but then he lifted his hand from over his eyes. "I want to say yes. I really do. I want to rant about *him* and how he's made a mess of things..."

"But?"

"But," he agreed, "it wasn't just his fault, was it? I mean, when they were our age, they tried to fix everything and had only good intentions. I know what I said before, but I can't really fault them for seeing a problem and fixing it."

"Someone's been talking to his mom," she teased. "That wasn't really in question though. The league as it is definitely is an improvement on how it was before Red became Master. No questioning that. It's their decisions when things went south that really effed everything up, and you know it. Now, they're the ones that have to change and refuse to, so they're the problem."

Ash continued to stare up at the sky, one hand stroking Pikachu's fur. Slowly, he looked at her, brow furrowed with concern. "Why are you lumping your mom in with Red?" Red. Never his father.

"Why wouldn't I?"

He hesitated. "Your mom..."

"Was selfish and uncaring until the very end," Leaf finished for him, covering her eyes with her arm like he has earlier. "She never could find it in her to care about me. It was only when she got that *adventure* that she became more than a catatonic husk."

She heard Ash shift a bit, and there was a pause before he spoke again. "Leaf...your mom loved you. She died *for* you. Gary told me what she said to you...well a short version of it. She noticed you. She thought you were amazing."

"Hypocrite." She moved her arm and stared at him, a burning sensation coming from the corner of her eyes. "Red knows you're a great trainer and that's why he stops you. He stayed away to protect you. You don't *get* it. Sure, maybe Red's a colossal dick, but he and your mother are both amazing people. They always have been. A thief and a murderer. That's what I come from."

"No." His voice was suddenly stern. Leaf looked over as Ash sat up and stared down at her, Pikachu rolling onto his lap and staring up at his trainer with interest. "That's not what you come from, and even if it was, it's not who *you* are. Your mother was depressed, and I bet if she was here she'd tell you that you were the only thing that kept her going at all. That's what my mom said at least. And my mom...you come from her too. We grew up together, and she loves you like a daughter too. You come from friends that see you as family. You come from the people you saved."

Leaf sat up and looked down, her vision blurring. She could still make out Espeon snuggling close to her.

Ash hesitated before reaching forward and placing a hand on her shoulder. "Your mom needed help and she never got it. Just like you are now." Her head shot up as she stared at him. His expression was soft and sad. "You always said that you didn't want to be like her, and that's okay, so why start now?"

"Ash..."

"I hate that you feel sad all the time. You...you were one of my best friends growing up. You still are now. It's selfish I guess, but I just...I just want to see you happy again. I don't want to see your mother accidentally drag you down one more time."

Leaf felt like she couldn't breathe for a moment. Then something in her broke. She inhaled sharply, trying to will her tears to not actually fall. She hugged her knees to her chest. "How do I do it? I know she died for me. She had the ability to be a good mother all along. I know she was depressed. I know. But I still...how do I even have the right to be upset with her? She died for me."

"When I was talking to my therapist," Ash said, almost hesitantly. Leaf got the distinct feeling that

he was trying to avoid talking about himself and focus on her, but she still nodded her head to keep him going. "We realized that I had built a picture up of Pokémon Master Red as an amazing person, and I had a picture of my father as a complete loser. Then I found out they were one and the same and that he was willing to let Dawn and I die. The two images I built up in my head were both a lie and the truth. I...I understand now why Red did why he did. I get why he'd want to help a lot of people over two, but it will never sit right with me. How he handled this whole mess doesn't sit well. The therapist told me that I could hold onto that anger, or I could accept it and move on. I was super confused about this and ranted to my mom."

That caught her interest more than the therapist. "Your mom?"

"Yeah. She said that it doesn't mean forgetting or forgiving. Nothing that Red ends up doing will ever take away the betrayal or hurt, and it's okay."

"It's okay?"

He sent her a watery smile. "It's okay. It's okay to hate him but also admire him in a sense. It's okay to hate him even if he does something in the future like save my life. What I feel is what I feel." He stared at her. "So it's okay, Leaf."

"It's okay," she repeated, in more of a whisper than anything else.

"You should talk to someone. Someone who isn't as messed up as me right now. My mom's really good for advice, and she loves you, so she'd help you in a heartbeat." He paused. "She lost everything once too."

Leaf brushed her tears away. "Maybe."

"Good, cause if we're going to tear apart the Pokémon League, you gotta get better too, right? Like we promised. We'll fix the mistakes they made."

At first, she was a bit startled, but then she laughed, a genuine but strained one. "That's right. We will."

...

Misty screamed as a poison dart scraped by Ash's arm. She stood up from her seat, still holding Pikachu (who looked equally horrified) and though there was nowhere she could go, and nothing she could do, Leaf still grabbed her by the arm and hauled her back down.

"It's okay," Leaf assured her. "I'm sure that hurts like hell, but it won't be a lethal dose." She winced a bit at the gash on Ash's arm that he was now holding. "You know Pokémon can control the heat of their flames, or of water, and they can control the toxicity of their attacks. It's illegal in league battles to use lethal toxicity, in case this exact situation happens."

"She's right," Brock agreed. "He'll be fine." He cast a look at Leaf. "You certainly know a lot about League rules."

"I made it my business to know," she said cryptically, leaving it at that. No one else knew of the plan, and it was going to stay that way for now in case something fell through.

Leaf had to admit, Ariados' poison seemed to be slowing Ash's movement down. It was too bad that Gliscor seemed to take the accidental attack on his trainer to heart, his movements becoming more rapid and fierce.

"Why isn't he healing it?" Bonnie asked. "He can do that, right?"

"He's keeping that on the DL," Max answered for her. "No need for someone to accuse him of using special abilities because of it."

Leaf nodded in agreement. She knew that Ash was purposely going out of his way to not rely on his Aura abilities, though his connection with his Pokémon was something that couldn't be ignored or lessened. Still, he didn't want to be accused of cheating by healing his Pokémon or attacking for them, or something ridiculous like that.

"He'll be okay," she assured them all again, squeezing Misty's hand in a comforting way. "I promise. He's fine."

...

Leaf had decided early on that she really had no place in a kitchen. It wasn't really a problem, since microwavable, nutritional options were available, but apparently one Delia Ketchum strongly disagreed with this thought. Leaf hadn't realized that her kind gesture of helping the woman carry home her groceries would turn into a cooking lesson.

Everything she did was carefully monitored by Ash's mother, who was quick to realize when she was about to make a mistake, and gently corrected her.

It surprised Leaf just how much she was enjoying it.

Glancing up at the woman after carefully placing the dish in the oven, she asked, "Where's Ash, anyway? Normally he'd be crashing down the door at the smell of food."

"He left early this morning," the woman explained, setting the timer for their food. "He's heading towards Vermillion City – taking the transits to get there and then making his way to Cerulean by foot for the training, I think." She moved around the room, collecting green tea and a couple of glasses from the cupboard for them.

That was good. Her pride could use a few days without his Pokémon ripping through hers like they were weaklings.

She eyed the woman for a moment, this was the first time they had been alone together in quite some time, especially without the potential for interruption. Unless Mimey counted, but he seemed too busy battling the stubborn weeds outside.

"Delia," she spoke up hesitantly, "did you...well...can I ask you a question?"

Delia looked terribly amused by this. "Of course you can. There's no need to ask!" She handed the young woman a glass.

Leaf bit her lip and looked down, swirling her drink around in the cup a few times. "Even if it's about my mom?"

If Leaf was looking up, she would have seen Delia's smile fall from her face, concern replacing it. She did look up when the woman placed a hand on her shoulder and smiled. "Let's go sit in the living room, and I'll try to answer as best as I can."

Drinks in hand, the two made their way to the comfortable couch. Leaf had always loved this house, with how warm, colourful, and inviting it was. It was easy to feel at home there, unlike the plain, regularly messy place she grew up in. "What was she like back when you first met her?"

"Hmm," Delia leaned back a bit on the couch, eyes looking towards the ceiling in thought. "Green was a very...outgoing person, and came across as very confident of herself and her actions." She looked back at Leaf, a small smile on her face. "She was a bit of a flirt with...well...everyone, but it was all in good fun. She knew exactly how to get Red and Blue riled up."

Leaf blinked, not quite sure how to take this. It didn't sound at all like the woman she had known.

Delia seemed to sense her confusion, and kept talking to explain a little more. "But...there was always a darkness that followed her around too. She didn't have a family growing up, and was closer to Pokémon than people for a long time. Sometimes it was like she just didn't understand how to act around people – especially those she was closest to. She did some very questionable things, but she always had good intentions, from her view."

From her view. Leaf supposed she could understand that. Everyone always thought their own actions were the right course. "So she was everything the rumours about her said."

"Yes." Delia's answer was firm, so Leaf was a bit startled when she kept going. "And so much more. She was brave, and she grew to care about her friends a lot. She was determined to stop Team Rocket and protect others." She paused. "I know it's not what you want to hear, but you're very much like her. She knew it too."

Delia was right, she didn't want to hear that. The comparison to her deceased mother didn't bother Leaf nearly as much as it used to, but it still stung. "Oh."

"It was startling to see you, Ash, and Gary together growing up. So much like her, Red, and Blue. Mind you, they grew up together, she met them later on, but the point still stands." Delia smiled, taking a sip of her drink. "She told me once that it was like a second chance to do things the right way." She laughed. "You know, Hillary, your mother, and I were pregnant at the same time."

Heather. That was a name Leaf hadn't heard in a long time, and she was a bit ashamed to say that the memories of Gary's sweet mother faded a little more any time they came up. "We're only a month apart each, so that makes sense." It had always amused Gary, Ash, and herself greatly, growing up, that their birthdays were on the 22nd of April, May, and June respectively.

Delia nodded. "Heather was very calm about it, and I was terrified, but your mother was so excited from the beginning. You were the brightest part of her life."

Somehow, that was startling. "I was?" A part of her *knew* that her mother had loved her and was proud of her, she said so with her dying breath, but hearing it confirmed from someone else was different. It gave truth to the words of a serial liar.

"Sweetie, you always have been. Your mother suffered severely from depression, and came to me for advice and help many times." Delia paused, brow furrowing, and Leaf was a bit amused by how much the expression reminded her of one Ash would use when he was about to talk about something particularly unpleasant. The amusement left her when she let that thought sink in. Before she could ask what was wrong, Delia seemed to make up her mind and said, "Do you remember once you stayed with Ash and I for nearly a month when you were really little?"

She frowned and thought back, faintly remembering being very, very young and staying with the Ketchums for quite a while. "Sort of."

"The first night you came here, I had found your mother in her bathtub, with a razor on the floor."

"What?" Of all the things Leaf expected to hear, it wasn't that.

Delia shook her head sadly. "I was supposed to take you and Ash out for ice cream. Gary was sick at the time. You answered the door and—" she seemed to joke on the very memory itself, "—and you told me 'mommy is sleeping in the bath upstairs'."

"I *saw* her?" Leaf exclaimed in shock.

"You did. So I sent you and Ash into the living room to watch the cartoons you had been watching and I ran upstairs. She was treated in the hospital and went to get help, but she didn't want it... didn't trust it. Blue and I both tried so hard to help her over the years—but then—"

Still reeling a bit, Leaf finished her sentence faintly, eyes burning as she blinked several times. "Then my father killed Blue, Heather, and Blue's sister...Daisy, right? Then my mother killed my father out of revenge."

"Yes, and no." Leaf once again met Delia's eyes, not at all surprised to see the tears that mirrored her own. "She came to me, you know. I knew what she was going to do."

"You knew?" Oddly enough, the thought that Delia knew about a murder and said nothing to the police was even more shocking than her mother's suicide attempt. "You didn't tell anyone."

"I told Red. I—I've always had a way of communicating with him. It was only for emergencies. I know he did something to make it all go away." Delia suddenly looked fierce. "And I don't regret it. Neither did she. It wasn't about revenge. It was about *you*." Leaf mouthed the word 'me' as Delia kept going, clearly angered by the memory. "He was going to use you to punish her next. His own daughter. She was terrified because he had killed Blue and his family, he would have killed Gary, and she only knew one absolute way that you'd be safe from him. Even in her darkest times, your mother loved you so much. She had so many demons and didn't know how to fight them." Mrs. Ketchum visibly calmed down, a sad smile on her face as tears streaked down her cheeks. "She was so proud of how much stronger you were than her."

Leaf looked down, grabbing her drink and swallowing the rest of it, just to give herself a second to think. This was exactly what she wanted, the bare, honest truth. Wanting it and actually hearing it were two different things though. It left her feeling even more conflicted.

Crossing her arms in front of her, she leaned back a bit, glaring at the empty cup that sat on the table before her.

Delia's hand gently rested on her shoulder, and Leaf looked at her again. "But you know, how she treated you still wasn't okay, was it?" That startled her too. After all of the things that Delia had just told her about her mother, she was sure that the woman would insist on forgiving and embracing the memories that she had. "You can still be mad at her, be resentful, but you can still love her too. What you feel is what you feel, even if it doesn't make much sense. Never be ashamed of it. Gary's still here for you. Ash is here. All your friends are here. I'm here too."

Leaf slapped her hand over her mouth, but it was too late, a sob had escaped it. Fat tears rushed down her cheeks as Leaf's shoulders shook and she leaned on Delia, who hugged her tightly, running a hand through her hair.

"You don't have to forgive or forget, but for your own sake, you do need to let go." She paused. "Ash can't change the world on his own, now can he?"

Leaf snorted through her heavy tears and choked out, "No, I guess he can't."

...

Leaf didn't scream when Krookodile finished off Arbok, but that was probably for the best since everyone else around her did it for her. It saved her vocal cords at any rate. She did stand up and move closer to the one-way-window.

"Ah!" Koga exclaimed loudly. "You have proven your worth! I subjected you to everything I could muster. But my efforts failed. I must hone my skills. You will go on to the next match, and put your abilities to the test!"

Ash was quick in recalling Krookodile, no doubt wanting to keep his Pokémon safe so that any poison in his system wouldn't cause harm. He kept his other hand still firmly pressed against his wound, which Koga only seemed to notice then. He said something quieter, and Ash was led out of the room, no doubt to get that checked.

Before he left, he turned around and looked up to where they were. Leaf couldn't be sure, but it almost felt like he was seeking *her* out this time.

"Halfway through, don't muck it up, Ketchum," she muttered, keeping her hand pressed against the window. She knew he couldn't hear her, but she'd remind him of that fact later.

After all, Amanda Green, Jack Ketchum, John Oak, and Delia Bosque had once dedicated themselves to helping the world, and were crushed under the pressure in different ways. That wasn't going to happen this time. Ash wasn't going to be left alone in this, none of them were.

"You know – I think – no I know – I'd like to be a Champion someday too."

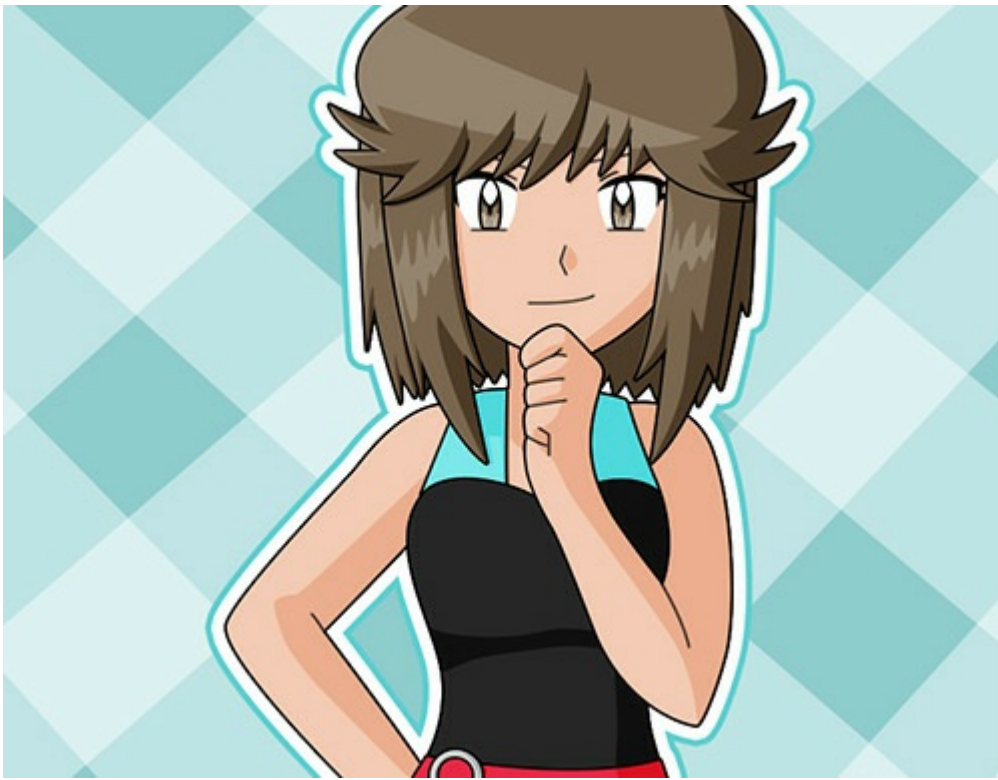
"That's awesome!"

"You think?"

"Yeah! I'll be the Master, and you can be a Champion! Hey, let's make that promise! We'll kick ass and fix everything together!"

She just needed a little more time.

"Okay. The world won't know what hit it."



Chapter End Notes

I've actually gotten a lot of positive feedback about Leaf in the past, and I'm really happy about that. She's essentially an OC hidden behind a known name and design, with a bit of the manga thrown into her personality. It's fun to write her, honestly, because I can take her in different directions that I can't with anyone else. So I really hope you like this chapter.

Someone asked about battle scenes, and no, I will not be going back and rewriting them. I've been very forthcoming with the fact that I suck at writing battles hardcore. While trying could be a challenge, I also don't have the time or patience for that. So no, no adding in the full battles.

I hope you enjoy this chapter, it was really fun to write!

Have a Happy Halloween!

Written by Skylight Sparkle

Edited by EchidnaPower

Gary

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Gary wanted to say that he wasn't at all surprised to see Blaine, the former leader of the Cinnabar Gym. In reality though, he was incredibly surprised. Who thought it was not only a good idea to give the man who led people to believe that his gym was gone for *years* the title of Master, but to make him an Elite?

He voiced this question out loud, and Leaf said, "It could just be temporary. They didn't really get that much of a chance to find people before the tournament, right?"

Gary snorted. "Probably." He watched Ash walk into the room, do a double-take, look up towards them, and pointed at Blaine with his thumb.

Pikachu laughed from where he was sitting with Misty.

"Remember how Gary once insisted that there was no Cinnabar Gym anymore?" she asked, smile wide and teasing.

"And then he showed up at the Pokémon League with a Volcano Badge anyway," Brock added with an answering laugh.

"Shut up, you guys suck," Gary replied, with no real maliciousness to his voice. He had been a little jerk back then, hadn't he? "Ash has this one in the bag. He's already faced a fire-specialist in the tournament."

"A Master's different, and you know it," Leaf insisted, and they all watched with interest as Blaine started to speak.

"Hah! I'm Blaine, the third member of the Elite Four! My fiery Pokémon will incinerate all challenges. Hah! You better have Burn Heal! Are you ready? Here we go! Woah hey!"

He unleashed a large, powerful Arcanine, who howled at Ash's Staraptor, and dashed forward.

...

It could be argued that Gary Oak was quite intelligent. It could be argued that he was well-spoken and rather charming when he wanted to be. It could *not* be argued that he was a good artist.

He wasn't trying to sketch out a piece of art though, as he sat on the comfortable chair in the therapist's office. The man hadn't said much since Gary started sketching, but that was just fine. He wanted to focus for a moment.

Finally, when Gary finished, he straightened up, and the therapist leaned forward to look at the sketches. "Interesting. Have you seen these somewhere before?"

"All over the world," he answered, clearly startling the man a bit. "When we were running from Team Rocket, we found a lot of different places where people clearly hadn't been in a very long time. I think the legendary Pokémon wanted us to see these for some reason. It's been driving me crazy." Gary leaned forward a bit, viridian eyes staring intensely into the therapist's pale grey ones. "So many things are connected in the world, and though I always focused on prehistoric Pokémon,

I think this is significant too and I want to know what it means."

"That certainly is a goal to strive towards," the therapist said with an encouraging nod. "However, remember what we spoke about. Moderation is very important to you at this point. You don't want to get lost and isolated chasing after answers to an ancient puzzle. Remember, you have control over your own actions."

That made Gary pause. He had brought that up before, about how knowing that they were basically puppets to the legendary Pokémon had been one of the worst aspects of the whole ordeal for him on a personal level. He enjoyed his free will.

Surly he wasn't just playing more games with the legendary Pokémon by trying to figure out what all of this meant, right?

...

Umbreon yawned as he curled up beside Leaf's Espeon, the two Pokémon sitting between their trainers as they both sat, enjoying the nice day. How could they not? The sun was shining with only a few white, puffy clouds in the sky, a gentle breeze cooling them just enough so the heat didn't completely scorch their skin.

Gary was writing, looking from one book to the next, squinting a bit at the words. He could feel a headache coming on from the almost continuous squinting he had to do lately, though he wasn't quite sure why.

It was clearly noticeable, since Leaf snapped her own book shut, and said his name. He looked up at her, and she was staring at him oddly. "What?"

"Have you considered getting your eyes checked?"

"You check my eyes all the time and say they're fine," he replied, an arrogant smirk gracing his features.

Rolling her eyes, she swatted a bit of sand at him, managing to avoid their Pokémon. "You know what I meant. You look like a cranky old man when you read now. Nothing wrong with glasses. Your mom had them too, right?" Leaf looked unsure of that memory.

"She did," Gary agreed. He sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Maybe. It might help with the headaches."

"Ash!" An annoyed yell startled them, reminding them that they weren't alone on the beach.

Gary looked around as Ash started laughing, scrambling up onto the shell of the Lapras that had returned to him recently. Misty was glaring at him furiously, but instead of backing her up, her Pokémon mostly seemed amused.

Misty was supposed to be helping him train his water Pokémon, hence why he only had Lapras, Totodile, Floatzel, Corphish, Seismitoad, and Wartortle with him, Pikachu staying behind to play with the others on the ranch.

To Gary though, it didn't seem to be so much training as it was them goofing around in the water, but hey, maybe that was just how Misty did things. He wasn't there to judge.

He watched as Misty scrambled after Ash, who took off with another laugh, and shook his head. "They're ridiculous."

"Yeah," Leaf agreed, "but it's kinda cute too."

Huh, that wasn't something he'd never thought he'd hear her say. Gary looked towards her, a smarmy response on his tongue, but it instantly died when he saw her expression as she watched Ash and Misty. If he didn't know better, he'd almost say it was longing.

His mind rushed over reasons why that would be, and jealousy flashed through him when he thought of how much time she was spending with Ash lately. Then he realized how stupid that was. Leaf liked him and he liked her. They were dating after all.

"Oh," he blurted out, catching her attention. He ignored her raised eyebrow as his mind raced. They hadn't really talked about that, had they? Let alone gone on an actual date. "I'm an idiot."

"Not disagreeing, but what brought that up this time?" she asked, clearly amused.

"Want to go on a date somewhere sometime?"

"Somewhere sometime?"

"I'll figure out something."

She snorted and patted his shoulder. "It's a good thing I promised. You're not as smooth as you think you are, Gary Oak."

He felt both insulted and excited. Of course, Gary knew that she was going to say yes, but he was still relieved.

Instead of getting annoyed, he decided that he was going to prove her wrong and show her just how smooth he could be.

...

"How can Ash stand being down there?" May complained, fanning her face. "It's so hot up here."

She wasn't kidding. The air around them was much warmer than normal as the fires below them seemed to grow larger by the minute, yet the trainers stood tall and Ash's Seismitoad managed to knock down Blaine's Flareon with a jet of water. The Pokémon twitched, but didn't get back up.

They all watched with baited breath as Blaine laughed, apparently having the time of his life, while Ash stood panting, cheeks red and sweat covering his face.

"Oh no," Max mumbled as Blaine released a large Charizard.

Ash eyed the Pokémon, and looked back at Seismitoad, who was having a hard time standing. He recalled the Pokémon quickly, tossing another Pokéball up into the air. Greninja appeared in a flash, landing neatly on the ground and staring at his opponent.

"Oh!" Serena cried out suddenly, startling them all. "His Greninja trained with Ash's Charizard a lot, didn't he?"

"He did," Misty agreed.

The two Pokémon shot towards one another, fire and water collided in an explosion of steam.

...

"When was the last time you got out?"

Gary blinked and looked over his shoulder, startled to see Tracey standing at his open door. The young man eyed his workroom skeptically, causing Gary to do the same. He had pictures, sketches, excerpts from old history books, articles, maps, pins, string, all linking locations together.

"It's just research. What are you doing here?"

"It looks like a conspiracy theory wall," Tracey replied, sounding more amused than anything else. "I came by to get some things my parents sent. Things are still a bit iffy in Cerulean, and Professor Oak said my parents could send packages here. My mom sent examples of flowers for Daisy."

Gary snorted at that. "Sounds exciting."

"Thrilling, really. When was the last time you got out?"

"Well, Leaf left on the 21st to go to some mini-tournament." He saw the look on Tracey's face. "What?"

"That was ten days ago. Please tell me you've left the house since then."

"Of course I have!" Maybe not as long as he should have, but he wasn't about to tell Tracey that. He was on his way to a major breakthrough on those pictograms, he just knew he was. He couldn't stop yet.

"Okay, well you're coming with me now, and we're going to get something to eat. You really need a break. Besides, I'd like to know how Aerodactyl's doing."

About to argue, Gary's stomach growled, and it was loud. He sighed sheepishly and smiled. "Yeah, sure. Let's go."

"It's good that you're working hard," Tracey said with a nod. "Working too hard can be a bad thing though. Take a rest. It's not going anywhere."

Gary's eyes looked around the room and he sighed again, shoulders slumping a bit. "I guess." He had the feeling that this was going to get away from him, but decided to agree with Tracey this time.

Besides, it'd be nice to have some human interaction.

...

"Gary!"

With a loud gasp, Gary's eyes snapped open as he stared above him blankly, not quite registering the worried, bright brown eyes above him. When his mind caught back up to him, he quickly lurched forward, causing the other person to move back.

"Ugh," he muttered after a few moments, looking at his surroundings to gain his bearings. There was a dying campfire not far from him, a pile of bags and supplies, and a blue sleeping bag stretched out a little ways away, currently housing a startled Pikachu. "What happened?"

"You were having a nightmare," Ash said, keeping a hand on Gary's shoulders. "It sounded like a really bad one."

Looking at his friend tiredly, he thought back, trying to remember what happened. "I...can't

remember." Umbreon gently nudged him, just as worried as Ash and Pikachu.

"You sure? You know I'm not going to make fun of you or tell anyone," Ash assured him.

Younger Ash probably would have blabbed, but Gary trusted this older, more mature Ash implicitly. He nodded his head. "I genuinely don't remember...maybe the cave again." He had been having reoccurring nightmares about exploring a cave, and having it collapse on him. He wasn't quite sure what that said about him, but his grandfather had suggested telling his therapist at their next session.

Ash frowned a bit at that, clearly distressed that he couldn't actually help somehow. "Well, if you want to talk, you can just wake me up. You're helping me train, it's the least I can do."

Gary was about to protest, to assure Ash that he didn't owe him a thing, and while that was true, he found himself saying something else entirely. "How do you deal with your nightmares?"

Ash sighed and sat down, crossing his legs. Pikachu hopped over, sitting in his lap for comfort. Shaking his head a bit, Ash said, "I was told to pick something and keep it with me, so when I wake up and see it – feel it – I'll know I'm okay and everything else was just a dream." He reached down into the pocket on his shorts and pulled out a small, raindrop shaped pin to show him.

Gary couldn't help but snort. "You would pick your girlfriend's badge."

Ash shrugged. "My therapist told me to do this. Well, technically I leave it open and he didn't say to do that. I always end up pricking myself on it as another little reminder that I'm not actually dreaming."

"Are you telling me you regularly stab yourself?"

"I regularly poke myself. A bit of pain, but never break the skin. Not on purpose, at least, and if I do by accident, I can heal it right away," Ash replied, sounding almost distressed. "Please don't freak out like Misty did. She thought..." He trailed off and looked down. "She thought I was trying to really hurt myself, you know?"

Gary couldn't blame Misty's panic. They had all gone to some very dark places in the past, Ash more so than anyone else. He could see that his friend was getting better, the improvement was impossible to miss, but sometimes he would stare off into space or have a dark look behind his eyes, lost in a world of his own.

Perhaps he could help Ash find something else to use that seemed a little less self-destructive.

"Finding something to remind myself that I'm actually awake is a good idea," he conceded, and Ash's shoulders slumped as the tension left them. "Dunno why my therapist didn't suggest it."

Ash shrugged. "I see mine once a week so maybe he's just had more time to tell me?"

Once a week? That was way more frequent than he or the others did, as far as Gary knew. He raised an eyebrow and blurted this thought out before he could stop himself. Both Pikachu and Umbreon glared at him.

This time, Ash met his eyes without hesitation. "I'm trying to 'pursue a high-stress goal that requires a clear mind.'" he was clearly quoting someone else. "Not exactly the smartest thing to do with PTSD, but it's what I want to do. Besides, my therapist agrees that training with my Pokémon is probably good for me, as long as I take the medication they gave me and do the exercises."

Gary was a bit surprised by just how forward Ash was, but he supposed he shouldn't have been. They had all seen Ash at his lowest, and he had absolutely nothing to hide.

"Gotta hand it to you, you're not goofing around with the therapy thing."

Ash shrugged and looked down at Pikachu, scratching the Pokémon's fur. "Mom says I can't help anyone else if I don't help myself first, and that there's nothing wrong with that, so it's what I'm going to do." He looked at Gary. "There's no shame in asking for help, right?"

"No, no, you're right," Gary agreed, slumping back down to his sleeping bag. Ash made his point fairly well. "Thanks."

"For what?"

"For being a good friend."

Ash snorted and looked at Gary as if he was completely insane. "You guys followed me through hell and back, it's the least I could do."

Gary wondered if Ash knew that they'd do it all over again? Despite where they were individually with their recovery, there was no doubt that, if they had to, all of them would follow Ash straight back into hell without any regrets or hesitation.

...

"Gary!"

He looked up, trying desperately to grab the piece of egg that he ended up flinging, but it ended up on the wall despite his effort. He huffed a bit and looked around as his grandfather entered the room. "What's up?" His viridian eyes drifted down to the man's hands, and he perked up. "Are those...?"

"Yes," Professor Oak nodded eagerly, holding out three white envelopes to him. "The last one came in today."

Gary paused in taking the envelopes, raising an eyebrow. "The last one?"

His grandfather smiled sheepishly. "I'm sorry. I didn't want you to jump on the first one you got, only to regret it later when the others came in."

The letters were still sealed, and Gary knew his grandfather had a point. He probably would have jumped at the first acceptance letter he received. He flipped through them, looking at the logos on the envelopes. Three different universities that he had applied to.

"It's okay to be nervous," Professor Oak assured him, and it was only then that Gary realized he was hesitating to actually open the letters.

"I just..." he trailed off, trying to sort out his thoughts as he slowly started to open one. "I really want this, you know? I really want to get into a good school to get my degree. I want to be able to apply to different funding to discover the past involving Pokémon and to solve mysteries."

The man chuckled and sat down at the table where his own plate lay, abandoned earlier for the mail. "I have no doubt that at least one of those is an acceptance letter. You have your mother's brains about you."

The made Gary pause, and he looked up. "That's right, my mom was one of your assistants when she was younger, wasn't she?" If there was one thing that he could say with confidence, it was that the people who worked with his grandfather were all vastly talented and intelligent in their own ways.

The old man nodded his head. "Indeed she was." He appeared to be thinking as he chewed his toast. "I've had many bright assistants and interns over the years. It was one of my many joys, helping younger people learn and make their way in the world."

Though his grandfather had never once growled at him, or avoided questions about his parents, Gary often found himself refraining from asking about them, as well as his deceased aunt and grandmother. He always saw the hurt in his blue eyes, and Gary hated it.

Still, he couldn't stop himself from asking, "That's how they met?"

He nodded his head. "Yes. She was actually from Unova and came over here to learn more about the bonds between people and Pokémon. I believe she originally planned on becoming a connoisseur." A laugh suddenly escaped his lips, and Professor Oak looked positively tickled. "I still remember when your father came home and saw her for the first time, he quite literally walked into the glass door and got a nosebleed...I don't remember ever seeing Delia, Amanda, and Jack laugh so hard at someone. Your mother tried to spare him some dignity at least."

Gary smiled a bit, trying to picture it. His smile faded as he struggled to put the blurry images of his parents into the scenario. Though he could look at pictures of them, it was always like looking at something that never really existed. It never really cleared up his own memories, though he desperately wished it would.

Mentally shrugging that off, he thought about what his grandfather said, and frowned a bit. "So... she just... gave up her dreams and stayed here? Because of me?"

"Oh." The old man was clearly startled by that conclusion. "Goodness no. She stayed here because she loved it. She practically ran this lab when she was alive and I was still doing fieldwork. It never ran smoother than when your mother was here. I loved my son and my daughter, but your mother ran circles around them when it came to organization and making things run smoothly. Your father was better at helping me with fieldwork, and your aunt with teaching future trainers." He smiled wistfully at the thought of his family.

Gary set his unopened letters aside, wanting to shovel as much food down in hopes that it would get rid of the nervousness. They ate in silence for a few moments, before Professor Oak said, "You know though, if someone *chooses* to stay home and raise a family, that's not giving up a dream if it's their choice." Blue and green eyes met. "There is absolutely nothing wrong with changing your dream. You were fortunate enough to discover this when you were so young. Your parents..." He paused and suddenly stood up. "Actually, I have something for you. Open your letters, I'll be right back."

Watching as his grandfather's lab coat whipped around the corner, Gary nervously picked up the first letter again, and opened it the rest of the way. His eyes widened, and he slowly repeated the process with the second letter, and then the third.

"Well?" His grandfather asked as he came back into the room, a thick, leather-bound book in his hands.

Gary blinked up at him. "I got accepted into all three schools."

Professor Oak laughed jovially and clapped his hands together. "I knew you could do it! I am so proud of you, Gary!"

The young man stared at the letters, in some form of shock, though at the same time, not shocked at all. Hadn't he thought that any school would be insane to reject him when he was filling out the applications?

Looks like he was right.

That thought made a confident grin appear on his face. He couldn't wait to tell the others, even if they teased him for strutting around like a pretty, male Unfezant. "Thank you." His grin faded a bit. "Now I have to choose."

Professor Oak looked at him quizzically. "The one in Sinnoh was your first choice."

"Well, yes," he agreed, feeling a bit embarrassed. If he was honest, he *did* want to go to Sinnoh. The schools in Unova and Kanto were not to be overlooked though. "I never knew mom was from Unova. If I went there...maybe I could find out more about her. Surely there's something there, right? But at the same time...the one in Pewter would keep me closer to here. To you, and Delia, and Ash, and..." He trailed off.

His grandfather sighed. "Leaf?"

Gary nodded his head, cheeks burning.

A hand was gently placed on his shoulder, and he glanced at his grandfather, who was smiling at him softly. "There is time to go to Unova and discover more about your mother, just as there is time for you to build something special with Leaf. Don't let either of those things completely dictate what it is you want to do with your life." He paused. "Besides, long distance relationships work much better in this day and age. Look at Ash and Misty."

He snorted. "I mean, if they can do it, I definitely can." He paused and stared at his grandfather. "Do you really think I should go to Sinnoh? I don't...I don't like the thought of leaving you alone here. Tracey's not here anymore."

"Don't worry about me. Delia volunteered to come around and help out a little more, and Leaf has been here quite frequently lately as well. What matters is what you want to do. You don't have to pick now. You have time to choose." He held out the book that had been resting in his hands.

Gary slowly set down the letters and took the book. He opened it, brow furrowing as he recognized his grandfather's neat notes on the slowly yellowing pages. "What's this?"

"I started writing down my memories. Almost like a memoir. It's about your grandmother, your aunt, your parents, you."

His head shot up, eyes going wide. "I can't take this from you!"

His grandfather shook his head. "I can start a new one. I thought, with the decisions you're making now, and how you're worrying about your life going forward, you'd like to go back and see what they did too. You were so young when they were taken from us, and I know memories fade over time. You barely even got to make them."

Gary felt like there was a lump growing in his throat. He blinked his watering eyes rapidly, and choked out, "Thanks, Gramps."

Reaching out to hug him, his grandfather said, "You know I would do anything for you, Gary. Given the circumstances, you're as much my son now as your father was."

There was no doubting that fact. Despite the loss of his parents, Gary realized that he had never really felt like he was missing the love of a father. They both struggled at times, but it made sense. It was okay.

Maybe Gary cried a little bit, but he wasn't about to admit it. Instead, he took a deep breath, squared his shoulders in the hug, and said, "Yeah, well, I'm still going to call you Gramps." His grandfather's heartened laugh instantly made him feel better.

He glanced at the book out of the corner of his eye. All things considered, he didn't really feel like he was missing out on much anymore.

...

Samurott's cry of victory as Magmortar fell seemed to echo louder than their cheering. Ash was certainly living up to his name, with soot and ashes all over his clothes that were also slightly singed, yet another hat completely ruined.

Gary watched his friend hurry over, practically jumping on his Pokémon's back as he hugged him. For his part, Samurott honestly seemed ready to go a couple more rounds, and wasn't at all bothered by the additional weight.

"I did lose this time," Blaine spoke up, sounding positively delighted as he called his Magmortar back, "but my spirit has not been defeated! My fire-type Pokémon will be even stronger in the future! Just you watch! This time, however, I am sure of the victor's strength. You're on to the last round tomorrow, Ash Ketchum!"

Ash smiled broadly at him, and looked up towards them.

Gary couldn't help but feel pride rush through him. From friends, to rivals, to barely acknowledging one another, to acquaintances, and then to friends again, they had been there for one another from the beginning.

Looking around at everyone else, the excitement was practically palpable. With every victory, Gary felt like he could do anything too, and he had no doubt that the others felt the same.



Chapter End Notes

A few people are guessing the order of the chapters, and I actually put it on tumblr before Serena's chapter. The last ones are Brock, Misty, and Ash, in that order. Sort of.

Hope you enjoyed this chapter!

Til next time,

Written by Skylight Sparkle

Edited by EchidnaPower

Brock

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Brock pushed his sweaty bangs away from his eyes. He really needed to get it cut, but there was no time for that.

At least it was an option in Pewter City, he silently acknowledged, unlike in Cerulean City at the moment.

Beside him, Forrest sighed deeply and straightened up, cracking his stiff joints. A small smile spread across his brother's face as he said, "It looks great."

Staring at the entrance for the new Pewter City Gym, Brock had to nod his head. "It does." They had all agreed that it would be a disservice to their entire family to *not* rebuild their gym, but instead of simply making it the way they remembered, using the old floor-plans that still existed, they decided to make something completely different and new.

All of his siblings had input into the design, but it was Cindy who was able to sketch out one that they all liked on the outside, and Susie who came up with some amazing ideas for the interior.

Forrest suddenly laughed, startling Brock a bit. He cast a glance at his younger brother, who shrugged a bit and said, "I was just remembering how *ugly* the front of the gym was before."

Brock pictured that off-center, plain carving and chuckled. "Dad was many things, but a good designer was not one of them."

Forrest looked like he was about to say something else, but seemed to change his mind at the last minute. "Well, there's a lot left to do. No point standing around, right?"

"Right." Brock couldn't help but be curious about what was on his brother's mind. That was what he did, after all: worry about his siblings.

...

"Welcome!" A strong voice boomed out over the sound system. "I am Lorelei of the Elite Four! No one can best me when it comes to icy Pokémon!" She put a hand on her hip and smirked. "Freezing moves are powerful. Your Pokémon will be at my mercy when they're frozen solid." She laughed. "Are you ready?"

The arena was a combination of tile, ice and water. It looked pretty treacherous, if Brock was honest.

He looked at Lorelei Prima, renowned ice master, and the member of the current Elite Four who had been with Kanto the longest. It was fitting that she would be the last one before the Champion.

Misty shifted beside him, leaning forward a bit with Pikachu on her lap doing the same. Brock wasn't at all surprised that Misty seemed more than a little eager for this battle. She always had idolized Lorelei.

"He's going to struggle with her a bit," Misty decided, causing Brock to raise an eyebrow. Many ice-types also were classified as water-types, but he would have expected Misty to be much more

confident in Ash than that. She blinked, looking up at him briefly as they unleashed their first Pokémon.

Both of them grimaced when they saw Gigalith, and Brock said, "Why would he bring a rock-type?"

"You know Ash, he doesn't *always* play it by types," Misty reminded him, Pikachu nodding in agreement. "That being said, I *know* he wasn't expecting to have so much liquid water around from the get-go. I wasn't either when we were going over strategies." She watched Gigalith square off against Lorelei's large Mamoswine.

"Strategies. That's exactly what you were doing." He snorted a bit at the fierce scowl sent his way. "What? You're both adults, albeit, young ones. Do what you want."

"Oh whatever," Misty said with a scowl, accidentally squeezing Pikachu a little too tight. She patted the Pokémon's head after he squeaked, and then looked at Brock. "You're just jealous."

"Hey, I'm with Lucy now. No reason to be jealous."

Turning her attention to the battle, Misty apparently decided she could multitask enough to ask, "How's that going anyway?"

A smile spread across Brock's features as he looked from her to the battle. "Good. It's going really good."

...

With a tired huff, Brock slumped onto Golem's hard side. "You said you needed *practice* being at a *disadvantage*." He looked up and glared at his friend. "Tauros-shit."

Ash laughed as he flopped onto the ground, crossing his legs. "They were at a disadvantage." Brock snorted. "All of them are weak against rock-types, you know that. Some of them were being a little too cocky too and needed the challenge." He side-eyed Charizard, who snorted smoke at him as he laid on his side.

Brock shook his head and chuckled. "Well he did win, so there's that." He stretched out a bit on the grass, moving away from Golem so the Pokémon wouldn't accidentally roll on him *again*. "It's been a while since I've battled. It was fun." He looked at Ash teasingly. "If I had a gym badge, I'd give it to you. You actually won it this time."

Ash blew a raspberry in his direction. "You gave it to me eight years ago. No take-backs." He shrugged off his sweater and moved so that he was laying alongside Brock, staring up at the sky. He let out an 'oof' as Pikachu jumped onto his belly, curling up into a ball. "You know, if I could do that again, go back to when I was a shitty little 10-year-old, I'd make sure I actually *won* all my badges. Not just *earned* them. Maybe I would have been readier for the league. Maybe I would have been more ready for him." He nodded back at Charizard.

"Maybe," Brock agreed. "But there's really no point looking back and wondering *what if*. It won't change the past." His eyes darted towards Ash, who fidgeted a bit and frowned, stretching his arms out over his head.

That's when he saw something that made his breath catch in his throat. Without any hesitation, he sat up and grabbed Ash's arm, looking at the long, pink marks on his arms that had clearly been healed very recently.

Startled, Ash sat up abruptly, but was unable to tug his arm away from Brock's firm, but not painful grasp. Pikachu rolled onto his lap and looked up at them with confusion.

"They're scratches! I promise!" Ash said, clearly realizing what Brock was alarmed about. "I was training with Ria and she swung around and the spike on her hand got my arm. You can ask her if you don't believe me."

"Chaa," Pikachu nodded in agreement with Ash's story.

Brock exhaled deeply. He didn't even realize that he was holding his breath. "Alright. I believe you. Sorry. I just..." He let go of Ash's hand. "I'm sorry for grabbing you like that. I panicked. You know that if things are bothering you, you can talk to me, right?"

Ash smiled at him fondly. "It's okay. I know Misty told you about how bad of a place I was in at one point – and it's okay that she told you, she told *me* too. I guess...I could see why you'd think that, but I swear, I haven't and won't hurt myself like that." He hesitated for a moment, and almost bashfully added, "I'm getting a lot better. Or, I think I am."

Clapping a hand on his shoulder, Brock nodded eagerly. "Yes, you are. I'm proud of you, buddy." He genuinely meant that. Ash had decided to be very forward with everyone about his struggles with PTSD after Team Rocket's takeover, not shying away from getting help or talking to others about it. It took him a while to get to that stage, but it was extremely admirable in Brock's eyes.

Thoughtful brown eyes looked down at Pikachu for a moment, who tilted his head, glanced at Brock, and looked back at his trainer before nodding. Ash nodded back and looked at him. "There still are bad days sometimes. I just...there are nightmares or sometimes I don't even want to get out of bed, but you know, that's okay. I know you'll do it anyway, but you really don't have to worry about me."

"Like you said, I'll do it anyway."

"Shh I'm in the middle of spilling important thoughts," Ash hissed teasingly, before quickly switching back to a more serious tone. "You have a lot on your plate too and I...you're one of my best friends, Brock. You were one of the first people I met that liked me for me – even though I was a smug little brat - and didn't turn away when things got bad. You may be older than me, but if you need anything, you know I'm here for you too, right?"

There was a burning behind Brock's eyes that he fiercely pushed away. "Don't worry about me."

"That's what family does though." Ash stated this so fiercely, that any type of rebuttal died in Brock's throat. "I mean it. I don't care if it's three in the morning before a league match or something. If you need me, call me or barge into my room or whatever. Even if it's just to get away, have a battle, or lay around and do nothing."

"Thank you, Ash." Oh hell, Brock didn't quite know how to deal with this. He needed to lighten the air between them. "It is what family does, but family also doesn't barge in without knocking because if female company is over there are some things I don't need to see."

Ash blinked in confusion before his face turned bright red. "Brock!" Pikachu snorted, and his trainer gently tapped him on the head.

"What? You guys are like my younger siblings. Don't need to know!" He laughed as Ash growled at him. Though his laughter died down, his smile stayed on his face. "You know, I didn't need any more siblings, but I'm glad I got the two of you. I was honestly a bit worried at first that it'd just be

more of the same, but at least I was on the road. You two were different though. More independent. Sure, I love May, Max, and Dawn too in their own ways, but it was a bit different. You two took care of yourselves, of each other...and you took care of me too."

Brock could still clearly remember the confusion he felt when Ash and Misty had taken care of him when he was sick once. They packed him into his sleeping bag with some medicine, and he figured he'd have a quick nap and wake up to cook. When he woke up, the camp was made, store-bought food was ready for him (bless them and knowing their cooking skills were awful), there was a fire, fresh water, all the Pokémon were fed, and more importantly, Ash and Misty weren't fighting at all. They had put aside any silly little arguments between them for his sake.

He couldn't remember the last time someone did that for him before that. Even when his parents were there, he tended to help out like a third parent more than anything.

Ash stared at him with an odd expression that slowly morphed into a smile that he was trying to hold back. A laugh escaped his lips, and Brock couldn't help but be a bit offended. He was spilling his heart out here.

"Sorry, sorry," Ash waved his hands. "I'm not laughing *at* you. It's just...you know that Misty and I basically adopted you when we were ten, right?"

He stared. "What?" His eyes darted to Pikachu, who confirmed this with a nod.

"Yeah." Ash was positively bouncing on the spot with excitement. "We argued over who had custody and everything! Well, until that time you wanted the ghost girlfriend. We decided we needed joint custody to keep you in line." His smile turned smug. "Clearly I won since you kept traveling with me."

He blinked at his friend before snorting. "Unbelievable. Is that how she always knew I was with you again?"

"Had to let her know I won."

"And after Sinnoh?"

"You were going off to university. You didn't need us anymore."

Brock knew what he meant, but shook his head in disagreement. "That's far from the truth." These two, honestly. He couldn't help but feel warm inside hearing about this. He could actually see ten-year-old Ash and Misty arguing over who got to keep him. They had probably even battled over it. It wouldn't be the first time that happened.

Ash smiled at him again. "We'd do almost anything for you, you know that, right? On my own, with Mist, or just her. We've got your back. All of us do."

"Pi pikachu!" Pikachu chimed in agreement, jumping over to Brock's shoulder and nuzzling his cheek against him.

The young man looked towards the ground, a smile growing across his face as he struggled to hide his tears.

"I know."

...

"...Tracey really seems to be doing so much better. I actually helped him pick out an engagement ring for his girlfriend! She's actually Misty's sister. Oh! Speaking of Misty, I think she's finally letting go of the reins of the gym a little bit. She's actually gone with Ash to the Seafoam Islands for training! And Ash, what's not to be proud of with him? It's amazing how far he's come, considering what he had to go through!"

Brock's therapist was a rather beautiful woman with dark brown eyes and vivid purple hair. She was tall and shapely, exactly the type he would have normally went for once upon a time. Now it didn't even occur to him. Not since he and Lucy tentatively began dating. Maybe he still got a tiny bit flustered, but that was fine!

It was probably a good thing that he wasn't fawning over her. It let him see *her* more clearly, and judging from her raised eyebrow, she wasn't exactly happy with his excited rant.

"It's good that your friends are doing well," she spoke up when she realized that he was done talking for now. "I always recommend surrounding yourself with positivity, as long as it's not too much for you. However, how about we talk about something...a little closer to home?"

"Oh, I can do that." Brock felt a little sheepish about that. Of course, he wasn't in therapy to talk about his friends. "I think my brothers and sisters are responding and coping really well to the people they talk to. The whole Rocket takeover thing was traumatizing for them, especially since they lost their parents and—."

"*They* lost their parents?"

He blinked at her interruption. "Sorry, I meant *our* parents."

"Are you sure?" She leaned forward a bit. "This isn't our first session, Brock, and yet I feel like I know your friends and family more than I know you at this point. It's good to care about others so much. It's really amazing, but I'm more interested in *you*."

Him? What could he say about him? He had been relatively safe for quite a while. Sure, he joined up with the G-Men and did a lot of research, planning, and he even spoke face-to-face with a thought-to-be-dead crime lord. His parents may have died, but he wasn't there to see it.

Delia Ketchum laying in a hospital bed after being stabbed passed through his mind. Domino had done that to her.

"Domino."

"Domino?" the therapist repeated. Brock was taken back. He didn't mean to speak out loud. "What's that?"

"She...she was a high ranking member of Team Rocket."

"Why does she matter?"

"She doesn't."

"Brock," she said, "there is no shame in focusing on yourself. Your own thoughts and feelings. While you're here with me, it's okay to push aside responsibility and anyone else. I'm here to help you. Not the world." She paused. "This Domino must be important."

He thought for a moment. Domino had caused so much damage, but what she had done to Delia Ketchum stood out even more than their encounter at the Tree of Beginning, more than the fact

that his parents had actually been killed.

What did that say about him if he thought about a woman who wasn't actually his mother *almost* dying, before he thought about his own parents dying?

Brock wasn't sure he wanted to know.

...

The words before Brock seemed to warp and lift off of the page as he read them intently. He was so engulfed in the thick, medical book, only lifting his head to double check his own notes, that he didn't even notice the door open, and a tall figure enter. He didn't notice them set two drinks on the coffee table in front of him.

What he did notice was them putting a hand on his shoulder.

He jumped, nearly tossing the book aside as he looked around, only to come face to face with a tall drink. He let out a deep breath and looked up into warm, red eyes. "Thanks." He took the cup from her, inhaling the scent of sweet, sweet coffee. He took a sip of the liquid and looked up at the clock. "Oh, wow! I didn't realize how late it was! And you came all this way to hang out this weekend."

Lucy laughed as she sat beside him on the couch. "It's okay. I'd rather you prep for your exam coming up anyway! I've been going through this paper work!"

He stared at her dryly. "You came to visit me and you brought paper work. I'm a terrible boyfriend."

She shook her head, and Brock was pretty sure she rolled her eyes. "Don't sulk. It's okay right now. Exams are important, just like getting the Battle Frontier back up and running is important."

He frowned at that. "I thought that they weren't starting the Battle Frontier again until next year."

"They aren't," Lucy explained as she stretched out. "The League is really pushing us to get everything ready as soon as possible. Makes sense, since it's going to take a while to fix everything Team Rocket ruined. Lance is almost *frantic* about getting so many things in place." She hesitated for a moment. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say..."

"What?" He prompted.

"I'd say he's worried about the Indigo Conference."

Brock paused as he thought about that. Looking up at her, he said, "Maybe he should be."

"Maybe," Lucy agreed, reaching down and digging through a bag Brock hadn't noticed until now. "It gives me a lot more work."

"I promise, as soon as my exams are over, we'll go on a proper date to a nice place."

She smiled. "I'll hold you to it. If Lance and Brandon don't off me first with paper work. For now though, don't feel bad. I've got work and you're studying hard to save the world!"

With a laugh, Brock said, "Maybe. A single person would be good enough for me."

She grabbed a pen and brought her paper work close to her as she curled up beside him. "You'll be greater than that. I just know it."

Brock chuckled, and both of them settled back into a comfortable silence.

...

"I've been thinking a lot," Brock said while staring down at his hands. His therapist didn't say anything, but he knew that she was listening. It was her job, after all. He also knew that she was going to wait for him to speak.

"I've been thinking long and hard about it," he continued. "I do have some good memories of my parents from when I was really young, but...they were horrible to me. I was ten, and mom left me with nine siblings, two that were infants. My dad took off a little while later. Sure, he was always around, but I didn't know that. Who does that to their child?"

"It is quite distressing," she agreed with him. He stared at her and she added, "Jerks do that to their children...to put it nicely." Brock appreciated the fact that she probably wanted to say more colourful words about them, even if she kept it to herself.

"We should have been taken in by social services," Brock said, though the thought made him feel queasy. "I didn't want to acknowledge that either. A part of me still thinks that it shouldn't matter. They were still my parents. They saved my brothers and sisters."

"It's true, they did," she said. "And you can accept that, remember them fondly for it, but you can still resent everything else that they've done."

Brock nodded his head, twisting his hands together again. He looked up at her and said, "Would it be selfish to just...leave for a bit? Step back from everything and just..." He shrugged.

The woman smiled at him. "Taking some time to focus on yourself is not at all selfish. From everything you've told me, I don't think that'll be easy for you, but it probably is something you need. It's definitely something you deserve."

...

Awe rushed through Brock as Infernape stood over Lorelei's Alolan Sandslash. The latter tried to get back up, but ended up collapsing to the ground.

Before any of them could cheer, Lorelei's voice boomed through the room. "How dare you!"

Ash took a step back, clearly startled. They all watched as Lorelei recalled her Sandslash, and shook her head. She looked down at the floor, her next words coming out much softer. "You're better than I thought." She looked back up at him. "Much better. You've done it, Ash Ketchum. You've defeated the Elite Four. The Champion awaits your challenge tomorrow, so you've only gotten a taste of the Pokémon League's power."

Any anger vanished as she smiled. "I remember you from when you were younger. We met once. I don't know what will happen in the future, none of us do. We just have to do what we can here and now."

"He did it," Misty whispered. "He really did it." She smiled and laughed, hugging Pikachu close.

Misty's words sent a ripple through their group, and they were cheering and laughing. Brock couldn't keep the smile off of his face. The boy that had failed miserably against him in his first ever gym challenge had beaten the Elite Four.

He couldn't help but feel more than a little bit proud. It wasn't over yet though, and Brock would be

there for Ash, no matter what happened next.

...

"Brock! Can you come here for a minute!" Forrest called out.

Brock looked up from where he had been going over some notes. It worried him a bit that Forrest was in the kitchen, but surely his brother wouldn't set something on fire again and leave everything for Salvador and Yolanda, who were much better cooks.

He got up and walked into the room, coming to an immediate stop when he saw all of his siblings standing before him.

"What did you do?" The question came out before he could stop it, a bit of a stern tone to it.

"I told you," Tommy said to the others.

"It's nothing bad!" Cindy assured him.

He chose to remain wary, but moved close to them. Forrest took a step forward and held out a small box neatly wrapped with green paper and orange ribbons. He blinked with confusion, and slowly reached forward, taking it into his hand. "What's this for?"

"Just open it!" Tilly said, the 12-year-old practically bouncing with excitement.

Brock slowly took apart the paper, raising an eyebrow at a velvet, black box. He opened it, his breath leaving him as he picked up a beautiful, oddly thick pocket watch. "I—wow. This is amazing! I don't really know what to say!"

"We all pitched in together to buy it," Billy said proudly.

"It took us a little while to find it," Yolanda admitted. "And we *did* end up asking Ash for help, but it was worth it."

Looking up at them, Brock raised an eyebrow. "Why did *Ash* have to help you find a pocket watch?"

Snorts of laughter met his question. Salvador shook his head. "Open it."

Pressing the button to open the cover and see the clock inside, his breath caught in his throat. Around the edge was the time, but instead of the hands of a clock, the little numbers lit up as the seconds went by. In the middle of it laid a multicoloured stone, a black symbol shimmering on the inside. "You got me a mega stone." Was that his voice cracking like he was 13 again?

"Well, we wanted to get you something, and figured that you had a Steelixite but no way to activate it, so it seemed like a good idea," Susie said, clapping her hands together. "Do you like it?"

"Like it? You guys...this is amazing." He blinked back the tears prickling behind his eyes. "I can't begin to thank you enough." He knew how hard it was to find mega stones, and would definitely be asking Ash about this later, since Brock knew for a fact that he hadn't even found one for Misty yet (they shared one).

"You're the one I remember taking care of me," Tilly said, startling him a bit. "Not mom or dad. It was always you."

"You ran a gym when you were still a kid, younger than any of us are now," Billy added.

"All while cleaning up after us," Timmy said.

"You made sure we were happy and healthy by packing us lunches and having breakfast and supper ready," Susie said.

"You walked us to school before running back to open the gym on time, all while doing your own school work too," Cindy added.

"You even came to talk to the teachers when some of us," Tommy's eyes shifted, "who were definitely not me, got into trouble."

"You were our mother, and our father. Sure, we had mom and dad later on too, but it wasn't the same," Salvador added.

"We got you that to thank you. Thank you for being the parent that we needed. It wasn't fair that you had to lose your childhood because mom and dad were selfish. We all know that's how you'll always be, but we're older now. We can take care of ourselves, but it's not just that," Yolanda explained.

Forrest nodded his head. "We want to help you too. We got you that to show you how much we appreciate everything you've done, but it really isn't enough. We want you to let us help take care of you too. We did have the best person teaching us, right?"

Oh hell. Brock couldn't hold back the tears now. "Get over here." Chaos ensued as they all jumped on each other, more a Growlithe-pile than a group hug. It didn't matter to Brock though.

What mattered was that he loved his family, and they loved him. No matter what had happened with their parents in the past, nothing would rip apart their real family.



...

Note

This chapter, especially the end, was oddly emotional to write. Bless Brock and everything he does for everyone he loves.

About Gary's chapter: there really isn't enough scenes with him and Professor Oak. And it was never my intention to take characters and make them all super likeable or anything, you can still dislike them even in my stories, but I tried to make them more well-rounded.

Mental health issues are very important to me, and while I can't identify with exactly what these guys are going through, I do have anxiety and depression myself, so I'm trying to at least do these guys a little bit of justice.

The way this universe works, so there's no confusion: there's the league conference where you can become the tournament champion if you win. Then the tournament champion (Ash in this case) can face the Elite 4 (Piper, Koga, Blaine, Lorelai) before they face the regional Champion (Lance). Red is above all of them. There are a ton of conditions you have to meet to be able to face Red, and one of them is being a regional Champion.

And for the record, I am always planting little seeds for potential story lines. The problem is inspiration. I know what happens in this universe but writing it down is a different thing. If I feel like it though, at least the foreshadowing is already there!

I think that's all for now . Hope you liked this chapter!

Til next time,

Written by Skylight Sparkle
Edited by EchidaPower

Misty

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"You're shaking."

Ash glanced down at his hands as Misty took them into hers, stilling the quiver in his hands. She squeezed them gently, and he looked back up at her.

Misty smiled encouragingly. "I haven't seen you this nervous in a long time. You'll be okay."

"It's not the battle, not really," he admitted. "I'm ready for that, my Pokémon are ready too." He looked over at Pikachu, who was standing on the floor beside them.

"Pi Pikachu!" Pikachu cried out excitedly.

"But you're still shaking, and it's not because of the AC," she insisted.

"It's everything that comes after. Everyone keeps lecturing me about how much responsibility there is in being the Champion of a region," Ash explained.

"But you're not going to be the Champion of a region, not for long. You're going after Red next."

Ash stared at her for a moment before laughing. "You have more confidence in me than I do right now."

"Well, I'm always right, so there's that."

He snorted, and she pretended to be offended. With a grin, Ash tugged her forward, resting his forehead against hers. "Thanks, Mist. It means a lot, you know? I'd probably go stir-crazy with just Pikachu here. No offense, bud."

Pikachu just shrugged.

"Well, only one person could come and see you, and we weren't going to let you sit alone. I don't know if you'll be able to see us or if it's hidden like in the other arenas, but we'll all be up in the seating area cheering for you."

"I know."

They both looked up as a referee appeared at the door. "One minute, Mr. Ketchum." Unlike in the Elite Four matches where there were no referees, it was required for Championship matches to have them. Misty decided not to question the inner workings of the Kanto League for now. She'd just bother Ash for answers after he won.

Ash took a deep breath, and nodded his head. The man left.

Misty squeezed his hand again to get his attention. "I'd say good luck, but you don't need it. Lance always thought you were special. Go prove him right."

Ash smiled, and pecked her lightly on the lips before moving away. He held out his arm for Pikachu, who turned to face Misty once he was settled on Ash's shoulder. The Pokémon held up his thumb.

She smiled bright, waiting for the door to close behind him before turning to go back to her own seat. She didn't want to miss a moment of this battle.

...

Fiddling a bit with the necklace around her neck, Misty looked at the kind woman sitting across from her. There was a warm, yet professional air around her. She was probably nearing the end of her career based on her silver hair, but she still seemed very eager to talk.

"I don't really know where to start," Misty admitted sheepishly, her fingers going down to the edge of her denim skirt.

"Perhaps you can describe how close to the Rocket situation you were? Everyone had such different experiences."

Misty snorted and shook her head. She really hoped this woman had clearance to know all of this through the League, but at the same time, she also didn't care. "I was one of the reasons that the League even realized something weird was going on before everything turned into a huge mess." She shrugged. "I was bait for Ash, my boyfriend. His mom and I ended up saving him, and Team Rocket took that as an insult, so they took out Cerulean." A bitter smile appeared on her face. "I was there when Arceus was fighting with Mirage Arceus, and Giovanni died. He shot me, you know? So, I was there for the whole thing." She paused. "But also Team Rocket apparently killed my aunt years before and probably had something to do with my parents dying?"

The therapist stared for a moment before slowly taking off her glasses. "Alright. We have quite a bit to talk about, and that's okay. We can start anywhere you're comfortable with."

She thought about that. "When I left home, I wanted to prove to my sisters that I was more than a little runt like they always said I was." Misty looked up, staring at the therapist. "I told them, and anyone I came across really, that I wanted to be a Water Pokémon Master. I was going to be the best Gym Leader in Kanto. The strongest of the Elite Four. I was so insistent and defensive about it, because I thought I had to be. I learned over time that I didn't, that I *could* let people get close, and maybe in the same way, I learned that I didn't want that anymore."

The therapist was clearly taken back, no doubt not expecting this train of thought after everything Misty had summarized earlier. She really wanted to get to the root of one of the things that was bothering her. She could only handle one trauma at a time.

"That's quite alright, that you've changed your mind about what you want in life," the doctor said. "You were ten when you left home, correct? It's only natural that it would change as you get older. Very few people keep the same goals."

"I know a lot of people who do," Misty explained. "People who know what they want for sure. Me though? I just thought that sounded impressive. I wanted people to be impressed with me. It was rather selfish, huh? I didn't even know what it meant to be a Water Pokémon Master. I didn't even know you had to take tests or all the other actual requirements existed. What does that say about me?"

"It says that you were a child that wanted to be seen as someone people should admire." The woman stared at her. "And now?"

"Now, I really *do* want to be a Water Pokémon Master, but I understand what it means. I've seen people do horrible things to other people, I've had horrible things happen to me, and I've seen them do horrible things to Pokémon. I know I can't save the worl—" Misty stopped, mid-sentence and

stared at the wall for a moment before shaking her head. "I can save a few at a time. I was thinking that I could be a Master and use that to get funding to open some kind of rescue, rehabilitation and research place for water Pokémon."

"That is a very ambitious and amazing idea!" She smiled at her, but that smile faded a bit. "You don't seem quite happy about it. I noticed that you hesitated for a moment."

How should she explain this one? It was a doozy, and didn't exactly make much sense. "It's two different things...well...no. It's one person." She paused to clear her own head. "I just...I don't want people to think that Ash – my boyfriend – is playing favourites or anything. He is *going* to be the Pokémon Master. You wait and see. That means that he'd be in charge and if I'm trying to be a Water Master, people might think..." She shrugged.

The doctor nodded her head and wrote a few more things down. "Your confidence in him must be very encouraging for him, however, I can see the issue. You'd like to establish this based on your own merits, which might be called into question if he's already a Master."

Misty tilted her chin up slightly. "Not *a* Master. *The* Master. As in, he's going to replace Red. And I *want* him to. I'm with him every step of the way."

Eyeing her for a moment, the woman slowly asked, "And is he with you every step of the way in *your* journey?"

Something about the way she said that irked Misty. There was no hesitation at all as she said, "Yes."

"Good. Wouldn't he respect the fact that you don't want any special treatment?"

"That's where it gets a bit...messed up. I'm pretty sure he would, but...when we were on the Tree of Beginning, Giovanni held a gun to my head and—I don't know what you know about what happened even though you work for the league, but Ash was the one to save everyone, or he was supposed to be. Giovanni gave him a choice, save the world or save me."

More notes were written down quickly. "That type of choice is very hard. Perhaps it made him more protective of you, but I'm sure him picking everyone isn't—"

Misty interrupted her. "He didn't."

There was silence for a moment before the old woman asked, "Excuse me?"

She grinned a bit, both happy and very unsettled at the same time, if that was at all possible. "He didn't. He chose me. Then I chose everyone else. Arceus basically said that Ash was the one who was supposed to save the world, but I was the one who did in the end. Got shot for it too." She raised her shirt a bit so the woman could see the scar that Arceus left behind. Misty had no doubt that he could have healed the scar too, but left it on purpose. "So tell me, doctor, what do you do when the person you love most ends up in a position of power, and you know that they respect you enough to let you do your own thing, but they also sacrificed the rest of the world for you?"

The woman gaped at her.

Misty nodded her head. "Yeah, that's what I thought."

...

Breathing nervously, Misty took a seat between Serena and Brock, who both greeted her with warm

smiles. She looked around at everyone else. Clemont sat on the opposite side of Serena, while Max and then Bonnie took up residence on the other side of Brock. She could hear both of them whispering excitedly about the match and which Pokémon they thought Ash was going to use.

Beside Clemont sat Cilan, who was talking to him quietly but eagerly. Back directly behind them, Drew, May, Dawn, and Iris were chattering to one another. Right beside them and behind Misty was Delia and Professor Oak. Next to him sat Gary, Leaf, Tracey, and then Daisy. All around them, Misty could see people that she knew, that Ash knew.

The Championship battle was different than the Elite Four. It was a little bit more of a public event in the fact that more people could watch it outside of immediate friends and family, and it was televised. The people that came to watch it in person had to be given an invitation, and considering how many people Ash *knew*, there were quite a few people there. Plus there were the Masters, Elites from other regions, and the Champions from other regions.

It wasn't very often that a Championship battle happened, after all.

Made from polished, intricately carved stone with large archways and staircases that Misty knew led to other rooms, the arena was certainly a sight to see. In a way, it reminded her of Cameran Palace.

Ash appeared out of one door, and if she hadn't been with him moments before, Misty never would have guessed that he was a bit nervous. He appeared confident, excited, and every bit *her* Ash. Not the one with dark shadows behind his eyes and regret in nearly every step he took.

Ash looked up towards them, and grinned.

Lance appeared through the other doors, his cape sweeping behind him dramatically. He walked down the steps, stopping in the box marked out on the ground for him. He waited until Ash was in place, and began speaking, his voice booming over the speakers. "I've been waiting for you, Ash. I knew that you, with your skills, would eventually reach me here. There's no need for words now. We will battle to determine who is the stronger of the two of us. As the most powerful trainer, and as the Kanto League Champion, I, Lance the Dragon Master, accept your challenge!"

A referee stood off to the side of the field. It still perplexed Misty that referees were deemed unnecessary for the Elite Battles but not the Championship one. Maybe it had to do with the publicity of it all, since the other battles were private. Who knew?

"This is a six on six battle. You can substitute your Pokémon whenever you wish. The trainer with the last Pokémon standing is the winner! Trainers, choose your first Pokémon!"

With a flourish of his arm, Lance tossed his Pokéball into the air. "Go, Flygon!"

"You can do it, Meganium!" Ash cried out as he threw his own Pokéball.

Misty held her breath as the two Pokémon eyed each other.

The referee held both his little flags up in the air, and then swung them down. "Let the battle begin!"

...

She wasn't really sure how she felt as she watched the remnants of the old gym start to get torn down. It had been deemed too unsafe for anyone to be inside for long periods, even the living area. Tracey had tried to help them fix it up in the meantime, so that resources could be put into other

things, but it didn't matter once the League decided to go ahead with the project.

She hugged her arms around her middle. This place had been her family's pride and joy. It wasn't exactly what she wanted, but Misty knew that she could have been happy being a Gym Leader there if Daisy hadn't stepped up. Now everything was going to be different. In a quiet voice, she whispered, "This was Team Rocket's fault, not mine."

"Damn right it was." Misty squeaked and jumped, looking around as Violet toddled over, her hand resting on her very large stomach. "Not even you can control the ocean. You didn't know they'd take affront to you being a badass and saving your boy-toy. Where is he, anyway?" Violet flipped her blue hair over her shoulder and looked at Misty expectantly.

"He was home for a while to train with Leaf and Gary," Misty explained after she calmed her racing heart. "He's heading to Vermillion next to train with Surge."

"Good on him," Violet said, turning her eyes up towards the new gym in the distance. It wasn't fancy or decorated yet, but it was livable on the inside. "I've been thinking, and you know, I never apologized to you."

"Huh?"

Unamused brown eyes looked in her direction. "I was terrible to you growing up. We lost our parents and it was hard, and then I just got so wrapped up in me. Daisy, Lily and I are a lot alike so we kind of banded together, but you were different and we took that out on you. I'm sorry." She sighed. "You never once deserved it."

Misty was about to tell her that it was okay, but stopped herself. It wasn't okay, but it was in the past. Instead, she chose to say, "Thank you, Vi."

Violet nodded and turned to look at the old gym being torn down. "I'm sad to see it go, but maybe it's for the best. After learning what happened there to Aunt Misty – what probably happened to dad and mom, maybe it's best to have a brand new start." She motioned to the new gym.

"That's awfully wise of you."

The elder of the two stuck her tongue out playfully. "Come on now, just because you grew up first doesn't mean the rest of us haven't. Daisy's at a Gym Leader's meeting, can you imagine? She never went to those when we were younger! And Lily's with her...gentleman friend."

"That's *still* sketchy," Misty said with a shudder. That man had to be around the age their parents would have been, if not older.

"I know, right?" Violet said, sounding just as perturbed about it. "I guess I—" She looked down at her feet. "Oh."

Misty followed her gaze, a bit confused to see a puddle of water, before something clicked. "Is that..."

"Yup." They stared at one another, Violet's calm face contrasting Misty's startled expression. When the younger of the two didn't say anything, Violet added, "I've been feeling small contractions for a while, that's why I wanted to be up and moving around. It helps."

"And you didn't think to – okay – okay we just need to – hospital! Right! You need to go to the hospital!"

"Calm down," Violet urged her. "It's going to be a while anyway. Let go to the car."

Misty stared at her sister oddly, but helped her to the car, and then into it. She settled in the driver's seat, turning the engine on and carefully making her way to the road.

"We'll call Dais and Lil to bring my bag later. Oh, and Brad. We'll need to call Brad. He was supposed to be getting in today but—"

"How are you so calm?" Misty interrupted, almost hysterically. "Aren't you in pain?"

"It hurts," she agreed. "But you're driving, not Daisy. If she was here with me, I'd probably have the baby in the car from stress."

Misty snorted at that. She wasn't wrong about Daisy's driving.

They got to the hospital quickly enough, and by some stroke of luck, Misty managed to find a spot rather close to the door. She helped Violet inside, letting the nurses take her away as she went to call everyone else.

She had to hang up at Daisy and Lily's excited screams. Not that Brad was much better. He was very distressed about being delayed, since he had no idea what time he would be arriving.

Misty hoped it was before the baby was born.

For now though, she was alone there with Violet. The thought made her pause, and she suddenly felt sick. Misty didn't even realize she was doing it, but she had brought up Ash's number on her phone.

She hesitated, before pressing the call button and putting the phone near her ear. It rang only twice before she heard a calm, sweet voice greet her.

"Violet's having the baby!" She blurted out, not even saying hi.

"Oh my, how exciting!" Delia Ketchum sounded genuinely thrilled to hear that. "Are you with her how?"

"Yes, and I'm the *only* one here with her! She's so calm, and I'm freaking right out and I don't know why." That was why her finger had skipped over the first person on her contact list, instead going down to the second one. Misty was *scared* and she desperately wanted to talk to someone who had actually gone through not only the birthing process, but waited with her friends while their children were born too.

Delia hummed thoughtfully. "You're worried about your sister. That's entirely understandable, sweetie. You love your family and you don't want anything to happen to them."

Okay, that answer was very obvious. "Well, I guess, but I'm not the one going through this. I shouldn't be this scared, should I?"

"Tell me, when you were traveling," it was a nice way to put being on the run from Team Rocket, "what did you think happened to your sister?"

"I thought that she was dead," Misty said without hesitation. She had spoken to Delia about this before. "My other sisters too, as well as the—" She stopped talking as it clicked in her mind.

"Misty?" Delia prompted.

"I thought that my sisters were gone and so was the baby. And now...now I'm alone here with Vi and I'm scared it'll happen again," she answered in barely a whisper. She understood. "I don't know if I can face that happening."

"Do you want me to come?" Delia asked her, sounding very serious. "It'll take a bit of time, but I could be there before the end of the day on the train."

Bless this woman and her big heart. Taking a deep breath, she answered, "No. No, it'll be fine. I'm not *really* alone with her, right? There are lots of doctors and nurses, and my sisters should be here soon. Her boyfriend is on his way too. Nothing is going to happen to them. Not this time."

"That's a great way to look at it," the woman encouraged her happily. She paused for a moment. "I bet Violet's scared right now, even if she seems calm."

Misty blinked at that, like a final push had forced her out of a haze and back into reality. In an entirely different scenario, she had been briefly alone, in pain, and terrified for her own life. It wasn't at all the same thing her sister was dealing with, but it was enough for her to understand.

"I need to go to her," Misty decided. "Thank you, Delia."

"Anytime! Be sure to call back when your nephew is born. Oh, I would love to see some pictures!" She was back to her excited voice. "And if you need *anything* at all, call me."

"You don't have to drop everything to come and help my nerves when I'm not even the one this is happening to."

"It's what you do for family."

Misty's breath caught in her throat, and she wanted to cry. Of course she knew that Delia thought of her as family, she would have even if Misty *wasn't* dating her son, but it always choked her up to hear it.

"Thank you."

"It's not a problem. Now get to your sister and remember to call me back later."

"I will," she promised. Misty hugged her phone to her chest after hanging up, a smile on her face. She took a deep breath and headed down the hall to where her sister was waiting.

...

Her heart was beating wildly in her chest as Snorlax managed to push himself back up. The Hydreigon that he was facing looked extremely perplexed at how the Pokémon could keep going, but that didn't last for long.

Serena suddenly grabbed Misty's hand, momentarily distracting her. "He can do it. You know he can."

Misty exhaled and nodded her head. "I know. I'm still going to worry."

Everything hinged on this battle, and that wasn't really a comforting thought.

...

"Get out!" Violet yelled, her hair pulled back into a messy ponytail, bangs sticking to her face with sweat. Misty couldn't blame her for being upset. Daisy and Lily were so loud, and Brad was

nowhere in sight.

The three sisters were about to leave, when Violet called out, "Not you, Misty. Please, stay?"

That startled her a bit, since Violet was much closer with Daisy and Lily than her, but she agreed anyway, coming back and sitting in the chair beside her sister.

Immediately, Violet slumped back, tears filling her eyes. "I'm scared. I mean, I'm excited for him to get here. Really, really excited, but I'm scared." She suddenly grabbed Misty's hand. "If...do you think...do you think you could stay with me?"

If Misty was surprised that Violet wanted her to stay during this part of the process, it was nothing compared to the fact that her older sister wanted *her* to stay for the entire thing. "Are you sure you want *me* here? Daisy's the oldest."

"Of course, you. If anyone's going to be able to keep a level head, it's you. I don't need them screaming."

"Alright," Misty agreed. She could see some sense in that. Though she was told time and time again that she had a temper, when it really counted, she could keep calm.

They sat in silence, until Violet said, "You need to travel more."

"What?"

"That was why Daisy took over when she did, wasn't it?" Violet groaned as another contraction hit her. When it passed, she panted and said, "You still want to be a Water Pokémon Master, right?"

"Well...yeah..."

"You mentioned making like a Rehabilitation thing for water Pokémon. I think that's an awesome idea and to get the best funding you-" She groaned in pain, and Misty reached out, putting a hand on her arm. "I'm good. Good lord, wait until you have to go through this. Anyway, you need to be a Master. You need to travel and learn and train."

Misty stared at her for a moment, not quite sure where this was coming from, nor why Violet decided that now was the best time to have this discussion. Maybe she just needed a distraction. "You guys need me now."

"No. Well, yes, but no. You need to go. We'll be okay. Holy shit!"

The doctor came back in the room to check on Violet's progression. With a nod of her head, she said, "It's time. Let's get you to the birthing room."

"Brad's not here yet," Violet said unhappily, but there was nothing they could do about that. "My sister's coming with me."

The doctor looked at Misty, who nodded in confirmation. "Very well. Please go with the nurse to get cleaned up and get some scrubs on."

She followed a nurse out of the room as they prepped Violet to move to another room. She nervously tugged scrubs over her clothes and scrubbed her hands thoroughly. For a moment, she thought about the fact that if she was in Violet's position, Ash would probably be doing what she was doing right now.

Well, he had better be. If he wasn't there, she'd be *pissed*.

Misty paused, blushing a bit when she realized just what she was thinking. There was too much to do to worry about that at the moment, and she needed to get back to her sister.

There was a lot of screaming, and more blood than Misty expected. It made her feel queasy, even though she was staying out of the way, allowing her sister to squeeze her hand painfully. It was enlightening, really, since apparently the baby didn't always come immediately after the mother was told to push.

She definitely wasn't having kids any time soon.

Then, high pitched cries echoed around the room. Misty looked up, watching as a messy baby was moved away, no doubt to be cleaned and checked over. She didn't really pay much attention to what was going on with Violet in those moments, but that was more of a choice than anything else. Apparently it didn't end when the baby was born. That was good to know, but not something she wanted to focus on.

The little boy they brought back was so tiny, with dark skin and blue fuzz on the top of his head. Violet let out a tear-filled laugh as she held her son for the first time. "He's so beautiful."

Misty thought he kind of looked like a wrinkly alien, but wisely chose to keep that to herself. "He is." Violet was absolutely enthralled with her new son, and Misty decided to give them some time alone together. "I'll go tell everyone you're both okay."

Violet nodded, and just as Misty was about to leave, she said, "His name is Kenn."

"Kenn," Misty repeated, smiling at the fact that her first nephew had a name. "I like it."

...

She screamed in shock as Lance's Salamence slammed Glalie to the floor. Behind them, Professor Oak leapt to his feet, staring with wide eyes at the cracks on the Pokémon's surface.

Ash almost took a step forward, but stopped himself. Any trainer worth their salt knew that leaving their designated box could forfeit the match, no matter how brutally hit their Pokémon was.

Delia had a hand over her mouth, eyes watering. "Poor Glalie."

The referee looked towards Ash, and Misty could see why. Technically speaking, Glalie wasn't unconscious yet.

Ash shook his head. "He's out." Ash called the Pokémon back.

Relief crossed the man's face, and there was no doubt that Ash had made the right choice, even if it put him at a slight disadvantage.

Ash's hands hovered over his belt, eyeing the Salamence that roared at him.

"Come on, Ash..." Misty muttered.

He grabbed a Pokéball and threw it into the air. "Let's go, Noivern!"

...

"Who's a cute little guy?" Misty cooed. "You are!"

In her arms, Kenn gurgled and kicked his feet excitedly.

She giggled in response and looked over at Violet, who was passed out on the couch beside the loveseat they were on. She heard voices from the hall, and was ready to scold whoever it was for being too loud, catching sight of Daisy's blonde hair. Instead of Daisy, it was Ash that walked in.

Excitement rushed through her as Misty jumped to her feet. She kept her voice low as she hurried to him. "What are you doing here? I thought you weren't getting in until the weekend! Oh, never mind. Come look at my nephew. Isn't he adorable?"

Ash chuckled at her excitement, clear amusement and fondness in his eyes. "He looks less like an alien every time I see him."

"Shush," Misty said. She never should have told him her first thoughts of her nephew. Turning her attention to Ash's shoulder, she shifted so Pikachu could see the baby. "What do you think? Is he cute?"

"Chaa," Pikachu cooed happily.

"Mist!" Lily's loud voice burst through the relative silence, causing Misty, Ash, and Pikachu to wince.

"Shh," the redhead hissed at her sister.

"Sorry." Lily immediately lowered her voice. "Gyarados is being cranky and won't let the workers near the pool."

Misty groaned. "Again? Ugh. Well, take Kenn then."

"No can do." Lily took a step back. "Just wake Vi. He's her kid." She turned and left.

"Pity any future kid she might have," Ash muttered.

A part of her *wanted* to defend her sister, but she was too annoyed. "I can't wake her up. She barely sleeps anymore and Brad's off filming some action movie." She paused, and then looked up with Ash, making sure her eyes were wide.

"No," he said immediately, though she wasn't sure if it was her Deerling eyes or the emotions he could probably feel coming off of her.

"Please?" She fluttered her eyelashes at him.

Ash looked at the baby nervously. Though it wasn't the first time they had met, he always managed to avoid holding him. It was strange, since Misty *knew* Ash was good with little kids. Babies were different though.

"Here, come sit down." She motioned to the love seat, where he obediently sat, Pikachu jumping onto the back of the couch. "See how I'm holding my arms? Do that." He mimicked her as best as he could, and she handed him the baby, fixing his grip a bit. Kenn cried slightly, and Ash looked ready to panic.

"It's okay," Misty giggled. "Just rock him a bit. If he cries too much, Vi will just wake up anyway. I'll only be a few minutes, promise. You're the best!" She hurried off before he could protest or change his mind.

It took her more than just a few minutes to convince Gyarados that the workers were not, in fact, there to ruin his new home, but fix it. She ended up having to put him back in his Pokéball, but that was probably for the best anyway while others were there.

Making her way back to the living room, Misty stopped at the door. She leaned against the frame, a smile slowly creeping across her face as she watched Ash. He had managed to get the courage to hold Kenn with one arm, his other hand hovering over the baby, who was grabbing at his fingers.

Her heart swelled at the sight, and her small smile grew larger.

Ash didn't look up as she approached. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah. No one got eaten." She sat beside him. "Everything okay here?"

He nodded his head. "It's funny, he's so little and can't do anything, but he certainly *feels* things. I can see it."

"What does his aura look like?" she asked curiously.

Ash's eyes were wide as he spoke. "It's amazing, really. I haven't been around enough babies long enough to notice really but they're just so..." He trailed off and looked at her for a moment. "Here." He passed Kenn to her.

Misty took her nephew back into her arms, more than a little confused as Ash slung his arm over her shoulders, his other hand gently touching Kenn's arm. "Concentrate so I can show you."

It wasn't often that Ash agreed to show other people what aura looked like, and she always jumped on the chance. She closed her eyes briefly, before opening them. The glowing colours of a world she normally couldn't see met her eyes, and she immediately looked at Kenn. She gasped. "Oh wow." His aura was so white and pure that it made her tear up a bit.

Ash let the image fade, and it was a bit mindboggling to think that he could always see things that way. The hand around her stroked her arm. "You okay?"

"You know I am," she said, looking down at the baby. "It just...it was amazing to see. I'm a bit jealous, honestly." She leaned against him, and Ash hummed a bit, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with her.

They sat quietly, until a sleepy giggle caught their attention. Violet sat up, stretching out a bit. "Don't you three look comfy?"

Ash's cheeks turned pink. "Sleep good?"

Violet ruffled his hair. "Yes." She reached out, taking her son from Misty. "Thanks. I really needed it." She was about to say something else, but Kenn started crying, so she quickly left the room. Probably to change or feed him.

Misty watched them go, and looked up at Ash. She was about to say something, but her words died when she saw the soft, fond smile on his face as he watched Violet leave. Her breath caught in her throat, and her heart beat wildly, though she didn't really understand why. She was thankful that Ash obviously chose to ignore her strange feelings, hugging her close instead.

...

Cheers rose up as Noivern hovered over Haxorus, who slumped down to the ground, clearly

unconscious.

"That's three Pokémon for Ash and two for Lance!" May said excitedly.

Drew shook his head, and Gary grimaced. "Not for long."

This seemed to perplex the brunette girl, who said, "What—"

Whatever May was going to say was cut off as Lance's Garchomp appeared. Light surrounded the Pokémon, almost shattering away to reveal Garchomp's mega form.

"Well...shit," Dawn said. It was a bit startling to hear coming from her, even if they were all thinking it.

"Language," Brock scolded her mildly. She just shrugged it off.

Misty physically flinched back as Garchomp slammed Noivern into the ground. The poor Pokémon had already been tired, and there was no way that it was getting up from that violent an attack.

As they waited for the referee to make the call that Noivern was unable to battle, Misty turned her eyes towards Ash. He was eyeing the field, but she knew that he knew his Pokémon had gone down. No doubt he was contemplating what to do. Pikachu wouldn't exactly be the best Pokémon to go up against Garchomp. Misty was actually a bit surprised that Lance hadn't waited to use that one after cornering Ash to only having Pikachu left.

It meant one of two things: that he was probably saving his most powerful Pokémon for the finale, or he was confident that the mega could take down Ash's remaining Pokémon.

She held her breath as she watched Ash's hand stray to the Mega Stone hanging around his neck. The one that she had used in the past herself. The one that had been used to allow Arceus to Mega Evolve.

Misty knew exactly what he was going to do, and it made her stomach jump nervously, because even if he won, this was going to end badly for him, personally.

Calling Noivern back, Ash tossed another Pokéball into the air. In a flash of light, Ria appeared, taking a moment to straighten the sparkly bow by her ear where her Lucarionite rested. She looked back towards Ash and nodded her head.

Silently, Ash's hand went up to his Mega Stone, which responded with a golden glow. Ria was surrounded by light, revealing her own mega form as it vanished.

"Wait," Bonnie said, alarm crossing her features. "Doesn't Ash feel what Ria feels when she's in her mega form?" That question seemed to startle a couple people who never made the connection or just didn't know.

"Yeah, he does," Misty answered, not taking her eyes away from the battle as the Lucario and Garchomp met each other in the middle of the field.

...

Normally Misty liked the rain. Though her favourite type of days were the ones that allowed for swimming and lounging beside the beach, she never scoffed at a warm rain shower too. Sometimes she would even venture out into the cold rain, enjoying the water against her skin.

Three days of thick, dark clouds and raging wind and rain on and off was starting to get to her though. They were supposed to leave two days ago, but with the unpredictable bad weather, there was really no point.

She sighed and slumped back against the bed she was sprawled out on, staring at the angry clouds out the window. She felt so listless and bored.

Shifting so that she was laying on her side, she first looked down at Pikachu and Marill, who seemed to be playing some type of game with three bouncy balls. She didn't quite understand what they were doing, but they seemed happy enough in their own little world, so she didn't interrupt them.

Her attention then shifted to Ash, who was sitting in one of the chairs in their little room at the Pokémon Center. His brow was furrowed, eyes narrowed, and lips pulled into a thin line as he read through the book on psychic-type Pokémon he had.

Misty had to bite her lip, because he looked like an old man that was about to yell at some kids for being on his lawn.

She knew that what he was studying was very important, but she also could tell that he needed a break. "Ash?"

He didn't look up, keeping his unimpressed gaze focused on the book. "What's up?"

Deciding that she actually needed a good reason to interrupt him, since she knew he tended to struggle with the studying aspect of becoming a Pokémon Master, Misty thought for a moment. There was something that she really wanted to talk to him about, but wasn't sure if there was a good time to bring it up.

Well, there probably wouldn't be a good time, so she might as well just go for it.

"Can we...talk about something?" That came out a lot more hesitantly than she meant for it to.

Ash looked up from the book, his pinched expression vanishing. "That sounds...serious." Even Pikachu and Marill looked a bit concerned.

She tapped her lip thoughtfully as she sat up. "It's something that's been on my mind for a while. Something I've been talking to my therapist about, but she doesn't really know how to help me with this aside from saying that I need to talk to you." She paused and looked at him sharply. "I'm not breaking up with you!"

He blinked at her. "I never thought you were?"

"Oh...well good. That's what would have happened in most of the shows my sisters have been forcing me to watch with them lately. Sorry."

Shaking his head, he set aside his book and mentioned for her to come over to the other chair. Misty stood up, but instead of sitting on the chair, she flopped onto him none too gently. Ash grunted, but didn't complain. Instead, he said, "You can tell me *anything*, you know that right? I don't...I know I tease you but I never—"

She fiddled with his blue outer shirt and shook her head. "It has nothing to do with *that*. It's just... I'm...I dunno...scared?" Misty wasn't even sure if that was the word she was looking for, but it was a part of it.

Though she didn't have any special power that allowed her to sense the feelings of others, she could practically feel the panic rising in Ash. "Did someone do something? Was it me? I wouldn't do anything to hurt you! In fact I—"

She pressed a finger against his lips to quiet him down. "Please, just *listen* for now? It's...weird to explain."

Ash nodded his head.

Misty was quiet for a moment, wondering how she could breach the topic carefully. "You'd pick me over *everyone* else in the world." Or she could just blurt it all out. It was better to be direct with Ash anyway. "Not individually, over everyone all together. Do you know how terrifying that is?"

He was definitely surprised, and it showed on his face. Ash was visibly fighting the urge to speak, but stayed silent like she asked him too. She really appreciated it.

"You picked me over the world *ending*. Not me over one other person, or me over a small group. It was me over everyone. I guess...I just...how can I deserve that? I'm *one* normal person. I just want to be a normal person, not someone put on a pedestal." Misty couldn't stop the distressed tone from seeping into her voice. A part of her still thought she was being ridiculous. Isn't this the type of thing that girls would swoon over? That they longed to have? Someone who would put them before *everything*?

Looking up, Misty was a bit surprised to see an equally distressed look on his face. She was confused by his silence, but realized he was still trying to respect her wish for him to simply listen.

Her heart melted a bit at that and she nodded her head, indicating that it was okay.

"I never meant to make you feel that way. I swear it! It wasn't...I mean...that's not what I did. Not what I was thinking!" His words came out in a wild rush. He squeezed her closer to him. "I mean, you're the most important person ever to *me* personally. I was...I wasn't thinking that way. It wasn't that I thought you were worth more than everyone else. Wait, that sounds bad. That's not what I mean either!"

"Ash!" She snapped, patting his chest. "Calm down!"

He took a deep breath. "Sorry. Sorry. This isn't about me, it's about you. I shouldn't have made you feel that way. I never meant to." He looked positively ashamed. "Because I wasn't thinking about you. I mean, I was, but that wasn't why I made my choice in the end. I was being selfish. I was thinking of *me*."

That wasn't exactly what she had been expecting. "What?"

"I was scared. I was so scared. I couldn't...I couldn't picture a world without you in it so I kind of said screw it, if you couldn't be there, what was the point? I'm sorry. I was only thinking about how *I* couldn't lose anyone else, about how it would break *me* and nothing else would matter then." He sighed and pressed his forehead against hers. "I'm so sorry. It wasn't okay. I swear, I never wanted you to feel like...I don't know. Overwhelmed? Scared? Like I was putting too much pressure on you? I'm sorry." He drew back slightly.

In one way, the words made her a tiny bit bitter, because she didn't like the implication that he made his choice because she was some type of object, but at the same time, she felt almost relieved. Relieved because he didn't necessarily see her as something that she wasn't. Not some goddess that was worth more than every other life.

He had been a traumatized boy scared of losing more people close to him.

"Thank you, for apologizing." Misty had learned long ago that she didn't have to say everything was okay, because that type of selfishness wasn't okay. Not that she wanted to die, or that she regretted being there. It was very confusing. At least they were confused together. "But you know...it's almost a relief you were being selfish." He cast her a curious look. "I just...when you become a Master, I don't want you to give me any unfair advantages. I know you would if I wanted you too, I have no doubt about that, but I don't want you to. I want to become a Master on my own merits. No favouritism."

It was such a big, existential problem that they needed to contend together, but what she wanted in the end was something real and grounded. It was something they could really work with, and that seemed to draw both of them out of wild, confusing thoughts.

Ash stared at her, hesitating while he found the right words. "Everyone will always know I'm biased towards you."

That was something that she knew. It would be impossible for him to erase his connections to her. "Well, what if you could just...take yourself out of situations where it would matter?"

"Yeah," he agreed, still roaming over his thoughts. "Yeah, that's something I could do. Just support you like normal and be your cheering section?"

A smile crossed over her features. "That'd be nice." She shifted slightly so that she could rest her head on his shoulder. "It's a bit scary to know someone cares about you that much."

He shifted his arms so that he was completely hugging her, his head resting on the top of hers. "I didn't mean to do that."

"I know." Though still confused about exactly what was going on in her own mind, and knowing that they'd have to talk and clarify some other things later, Misty still felt a lot lighter.

The storm outside didn't really matter anymore.

...

When Dragonite managed to hit Ria's leg with enough force to draw a bit of blood, Misty's attention instantly darted back to Ash. He grimaced, but only shifted slightly in discomfort. That completely changed when Ria managed to jump back away from Dragonite. When she landed, her leg shook and she fell to the ground in a kneeling position. At the exact same time, Ash did the same thing, holding the spot on his leg that corresponded to where she was hurt.

"Dragonite, wait!" Lance called out. He eyed them with confusion and concern, before realization seemed to set in.

With a grunt, Ash forced himself to his feet, clutching Ria's Pokéball. "Sorry Ri." She looked back and nodded at him. He called her back. "You'll be my last minute backup if I need it." He looked at Pikachu. "It's up to you."

"Pi!" Pikachu charged onto the arena with absolutely no hesitation, glaring up at Dragonite.

Lance didn't hesitate at all as he ordered Dragonite to attack.

Misty felt someone take her hand, and looked over at Serena. She followed the girl's concerned expression as she opened Misty's hand. It was only then that she realized she was clenching her fist

so tightly that her nails had drawn blood. "He's okay. He's taken worse."

She knew that. She had seen it time and time again. This battle was so important to him though, that she couldn't help but be nervous.

Misty had complete faith in Ash, but she also knew that sometimes there were unexpected setbacks in life. She just hoped this wouldn't be one of them.

...

Marill looked around curiously as she walked beside Misty through the rows of headstones. Already, they had stopped by a couple others, but there were still some very important ones that they needed to see.

Misty was carrying a pail full of almost empty cleaning supplies, while Marill followed with flowers in her arms. They moved in silence until they came to the headstone they were looking for.

Kneeling down, Misty took a deep breath, running her fingers across the names in front of it, covered in grime and filth leftover from the tsunami.

Marill filled the bucket with water after her trainer removed the supplies, and Misty dipped a rag inside. She brought it out and started scrubbing over the names. Marill grabbed a sponge and started cleaning the side of the tombstone.

Once the grime was removed from that specific spot, Misty could once again clearly see the names 'Landon Waterflower' and 'Calla (Stern) Waterflower'.

"Hi Mom, hi Dad," she whispered. She dipped the cloth back into the water, wringing it out and beginning to scrub the rest of it off. "I'm sorry it took me so long to think about cleaning these off. Everything was just so crazy before winter hit. This was the first nice day in a while."

Misty thought for a moment, not quite sure what to really say. She had no idea if there was any way her parents could hear her or not, but a part of her certainly hoped so. "Violet had her baby. His name is Kenn Filmore. His dad's an actor from Unova named Brad Filmore. He's really famous. Of course Violet would end up with someone like that." She laughed at herself. "Lily is dating some really old guy, I think he would have been around your age. I wonder what you would have thought about that if you were here. Oh! And Daisy's engaged to my friend Tracey. The wedding won't be for a while, but Daisy's already driving me up the wall!"

She paused, and realized that she had absolutely no idea about how her parents would have realistically reacted to all of this. Would they have been excited over their grandson, or would they have scowled that Violet wasn't married? Would they have yelled at Lily and kept her away from Hubert, or would they have just shrugged it off? Would they have been excited for Daisy, or would they have insisted that she could do better?

What about her? She didn't have long enough to get to know them, and they didn't have enough time to get to know her?

She blinked rapidly and took a shaky breath as she continued to clean. "I'm doing good. Someday I'll bring Ash by. You knew his father, Red. Well, not really his father. You know what I mean. He's so much better than Red though. Actually, I'm not sure if you liked Red or not." Her voice grew soft. "I don't know much about you, honestly. I'd like to think that you'd like Ash, because I love him a lot. I mean to the point where I'm 99.9 percent sure I'm going to marry him." Surly her parents would have been happy with how happy she was, right?

"Mar?" Marill trilled from the back of the tombstone.

Misty laughed a bit at that. "I hope you're proud of me, wherever you are. I have no way of knowing what you'd think of me, but I do remember Grandma Rose and I think she would be, so there's that." She stared with confusion as water dropped onto the stone, and looked up at the sky for any clouds, though she knew it was bright and sunny.

"Marill mar," her Pokémon said, pointing at her face.

She brushed her fingers against her cheek, surprised to feel her own tears. When she started crying, Misty didn't know, but now that she *did* know, she couldn't stop.

Misty was really thankful that there wasn't anyone else around. She probably looked like a mess, sobbing as she scrubbed off the rest of the dirt on the headstone.

Marill came around and placed the flowers on the headstone when it was clean. Misty reached out, picking up the Pokémon and hugging her to her chest. "I never knew you, but I still love you, and I hope somewhere out there, you still love me too."

...

Silence hung over the arena as electricity crackled and blinded all of the viewers. As the light faded, they all watched with baited breath as Dragonite fell forward. Pikachu flipped off of his head, landing on all fours and staring at the Pokémon. He was panting, and clearly ready to jump out of the way if he needed to.

Dragonite groaned and started to rise, only to stop and slump back to the ground.

Someone probably could have heard a pin dropping in the parking lot. It was that quiet. Not even a poorly disguised Jessie, James, and Meowth (TV reporters, naturally) made a sound.

The referee's shocked voice positively boomed through the room. "D-Dragonite is unable to battle. Pikachu wins the battle! The match goes to Ash Ketchum!"

It was like an explosion went off from the stands. Ash immediately darted forward, scooping Pikachu into his arms. He looked rather dazed.

Dragonite disappeared in a beam of red light, and Lance made his way towards the center of the field.

Lance's genuine laugh echoed through the arena, and everyone went silent again. "It's over. But it's an odd feeling. I'm not angry that I lost. In fact, I feel happy." He stopped in front of Ash, and reached out his hand. Slowly, Ash shifted Pikachu into one arm, and reached out to shake it. "Happy that I witnessed the rise of a great new Champion!" He held Ash's hand up in the air, and the cheers that rang out again seemed to bring the trainer back to the real world.

Misty watched as the smile slowly spread across his face, followed by an excited laugh.

Lance tugged the mic he was wearing away, and said something to Ash. He nodded and the two of them headed towards the door that stood behind Lance's side of the arena.

Misty laughed and blinked away her happy tears as she realized that it wasn't Lance's side of the arena anymore. It was Ash's.

He turned around as they got to the door, and zeroed in on his friends. He waved at them brightly,

Pikachu doing the same, before turning and following Lance inside.

...

Pikachu, Ria, Noivern, Meganium, Snorlax, and Glalie must have already been taken away to be healed, since none of them were around. Misty was a bit disappointed that she couldn't immediately congratulate Pikachu, but she'd see him later.

She settled on being the first one to reach Ash. She jumped, startling him, but he managed to keep his footing. He laughed loudly, swinging her back and forth excitedly before setting her down. She was about to yank him down to her to kiss him, but that would have to wait for later. Quickly, Ash (and Misty, because she wasn't letting go of him) was surrounded by his friends in a giant group hug.

"I did it," he said, almost like he was still shocked over the whole thing.

"I always knew you could," Misty assured him. Despite the fact that they were all a tangle of limbs, Misty still managed to peer over Ash's shoulder and catch sight of movement farther back.

Lance was watching them, a proud expression on his face. The person that came up beside Lance kept his face neutral.

Misty's eyes met Red's, and she glared at him fiercely.

From the moment that she had seen Ash interact with Caterpie, she had known that he was special. That was how she knew that he would beat Red when the time came. She believed in Ash, just as much as he seemed to believe in her ability to become a Master.

Who was she to tell the Kanto Champion that he was wrong?



Technically speaking, this is the longest chapter in the story. However, the only reason for that is because Ash's chapter was split up into not two but three chapters. They're all shorter than this one but not by much. I was a little shit on tumblr and asked people to guess the order of the last few chapters, and I said no to all of them because the ones who got it right only had Ash part one and two, not three. I'm a jerk, I know!

Hope you guys like this chapter!

Til next time,

Written by Skylight Sparkle

Edited by EchidnaPower

Chosen One

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Breathe in. Hold it in. Breath out. Repeat. Don't hesitate. Don't be afraid.

That was the mental mantra of Ash Ketchum as he hauled himself up over a steep ledge, his arms straining from exertion. Normally, it wouldn't be a big deal, he was known to climb like a Mankey, but this was different. He had been working his way up Mount Silver for nearly a day now.

That in and of itself was impressive. If trainers went along the routes that were actually mapped out, it would take longer. In an effort to avoid the powerful Pokémon that he knew lived within the mountain, he took different routes, guided by his Aura in the right direction. It wasn't that he was afraid, he just wanted to preserve the health of his own Pokémon the best that he could.

Sure, that meant that *he* was absolutely exhausted, but it was worth it.

He flopped back on the flat surface, using his Aura to assure himself that there was nothing around that could cause them any problems. He groaned and draped an arm over his eyes.

"Pikapi?"

Ash lifted his arm as Pikachu poked him. Following the gaze of his Pokémon, he blinked with surprise when he found himself looking at a corridor that led to a steel door. He looked back the other way, seeing that the ledge he was on led to a dark tunnel that he was glad he had avoided by scaling around it.

"Huh," he muttered, twisting around and pushing himself back to his feet. Ash walked towards the door, Pikachu sticking close to his side. Ash knelt down, pressing his hand on the rocky floor in front of the door and concentrating.

"Doesn't seem to be anything living on the other side," he decided, straightening up again. Pikachu jumped up onto his shoulder, but was ready to leap off and attack at a moment's notice if he needed to.

Carefully, the trainer pushed the door open, wincing a bit at the bright light that assaulted his eyes. The tunnels had limited lighting, though there were lights set up at different intervals. It was nothing compared to this though.

A groan and the shifting of stones behind them caught Ash's attention, and Pikachu all but growled. He could feel the Golem starting to climb towards them, and ran through the steel door, quickly slamming it behind him.

He took a deep breath and looked around the room.

Ash wasn't quite sure what he expected when he reached the very top of Mount Silver, but it certainly wasn't to go through a door and have basically a self-service Pokémon Center. It was honestly a pretty smart thing, with clear instructions on how to use the healing machines, and a simple bed to rest in. There was a small fridge with some water in it, but not much else, barring the tiny bathroom.

He stared at the silver handle of the door leading outside, and he *knew*. There was no way

that *he* didn't know he was here. There was probably some kind of alert when the door leading from the cavern was opened. This place's existence left a very clear message: heal up, because going out that door would lead to hell if you weren't prepared.

Ash knew that he'd be stupid to *not* use this place. His Pokémon could stand up to some of Red's Pokémon as they were, but if he had the option for them to be in tip-top shape, he was going to take it.

Reading the instructions, he placed five of his Pokéballs onto the spots indicated, and then hesitated. He knew that Pokémon Centers had big machines to place Pokémon in that couldn't or wouldn't go into Pokéballs, but that clearly didn't exist here. He looked down at his sixth Pokéball that he tried to avoid using at all costs, and looked at the Pokémon that it belonged to.

Pikachu sniffed the air, dark eyes staring at the healing machine as a disgruntled look appeared across his face. It was very clear: he'd rather take a run through the ground-type-filled mountain again rather than get in a Pokéball.

A stab of guilt rushed through Ash. He knew Pikachu hated Pokéballs, and he himself hated the thought of Pikachu being forced into one. It was something that he had done numerous times, for extended periods of time, when they were on the run from Team Rocket. He had hated every moment of it, and always apologized to his friend profusely.

With a sigh, the 19-year-old knelt on the floor. He held an arm out to Pikachu, who climbed up it without hesitation. "I can't heal exhaustion myself, you know that. I'm not going to make you do anything, but this is our last chance to heal before we face him. The only way to do that is for you to go in your Pokéball." Pikachu's ears flattened. "I'm not going to make you though, I swear it. If you don't want to, that's okay."

"Pikapi," Pikachu muttered. He looked at the Pokéball fearfully, and Ash felt something wrench at his gut. "Pikachu pa pika cha pika pika."

Ash blinked at that. "Hey, no. It doesn't matter if you're not one hundred percent. It's okay. Even if we lose today, it won't be your fault."

Pikachu shook his head, and then nuzzled his face into Ash's dark hair. Ash smiled and ran his fingers through his hair.

He glanced over at the bed and said, "Tell you what, we'll sleep for a little while, okay? That'll help some."

"Pi Pikachu."

Ash turned on the healing machine to help his other five Pokémon, and then dropped his pack to the ground with a groan. Pikachu jumped onto the bed, and Ash took the opportunity to roll his shoulders. It wasn't easy climbing up a mountain. Without bothering to take off his jacket, Ash flopped onto the bed, narrowly avoiding Pikachu.

....

Ash looked around the room curiously, taking in every little aspect of it. The woman sitting across from him smiled patiently, having introduced herself as Doctor Karrie Sully. She had a nice aura to her, bright and cheerful, but also strong and stable.

Pikachu cuddled up in his lap, appearing asleep, but Ash knew that he was still awake.

"You work for the Pokémon League, right?" Ash asked her, stroking Pikachu's fur.

"That's right," she agreed. "You understand why people wanted you to talk to me rather than a psychologist not associated with the League, right?"

Ash shrugged.

She chuckled and said, "There are things that we might end up talking about that are considered classified information. It's entirely acceptable for you to talk about to me. Nothing is off limits and nothing you say here goes to anyone else."

Ash blinked and nodded his head. It was strange. He didn't feel at all nervous about the thought of talking to someone else about his inner conflicts, but at the same time, he didn't really know what to say.

He voiced this thought to the woman, who smiled at him. "We can start anywhere you want. The end. The beginning. With something serious. With something happy. There's no wrong way to start."

"Well, what's wrong with me?" Ash asked her curiously. Pikachu's ears perked up, and he looked at his trainer, appearing scandalized that Ash thought there was something wrong with him. Ash gently petted the Pokémon before nodding at the file on her desk. "I've been diagnosed already, right? The doctors mentioned it but they rambled on about a lot of different things."

"Well, we certainly can't have that." She stood up and went to her desk, grabbing his file and combing back to sit in the chair across from him. "It boils down to PTSD – I apologize – PTSS. It was renamed recently because it's not a disorder. This has led to depression, anxiety, moments of dissociation amongst other things."

Ash nodded his head. The doctor that diagnosed him rambled on and on, and he couldn't understand it to save his life.

"I have a question for you, Ash." He looked at her with interest. "What would *you* like to get out of our therapy sessions?"

He thought on that for a moment, looking down at Pikachu. "I've...had to do what others wanted me to do for a long time, though I was told over and over again that I was making my own choices too. I'm not sure if I ever really did. I guess I just want to be...me? Make my own choices?" He looked up as Pikachu patted his arm. "I don't like who I am right now. I don't like feeling like this. I want to get better. For myself, for my friends, for everyone."

The doctor smiled at him. "That's a wonderful goal, Ash. I would like to do everything within my power to help you reach it."

"So I guess that means that I should start talking, right?"

"If you'd like to. We can talk about anything."

"It wasn't just a few months ago that it started for me. Lots of different things happened over the years, and apparently things were messed up when I was little and I didn't know about it...but I think...I think I want to start when I was in the Orange Islands."

"Alright. What happened when you were in the Orange Islands?"

Ash paused for a moment, and Pikachu stared up at him with concern. He looked down, and then

looked back up. "Lugia told me that I was the Chosen One that had to save the world."

...

He must have fallen asleep the second his head hit the pillow, because the next thing Ash knew, his eyes were opening, and the room seemed even brighter. It must have been night when they got up there before. It was kind of hard to tell time once a person left the exterior of the mountain for the inner caves.

Pushing himself up, Ash looked over at the healing machine, the screen indicating that all of the Pokémon were deemed refreshed. Beside him, Pikachu stretched out his arms and then his legs.

Ash stood, stretching out his own limbs as he picked up the Pokéballs. He quickly retreated to the bed, holding the spheres close to him as Pikachu leaned into his side. "Well guys, this is it. He's waiting for us. We've trained so hard, and I know we've all learned a lot. So, are you ready?"

He felt the familiar warmth of his Pokémon's positivity. Every single one of them were sending him waves of encouragement and determination.

"Chaa Pikapi," Pikachu said with a nod, eyes narrowing a bit.

Ash set his hand on Pikachu's head, smiled, and nodded. He looked up at the door and said, "Alright. Let's do this."

...

If there was one thing that Ash's friends could easily say about him, or even someone who just met him, it was that he was very much a man of action. He learned by doing, not by sitting around and studying. Sure, that worked for others, and he *had* to do online classwork while on his adventures, but the point still stood.

That was why he was getting so frustrated now, staring at the book in front of him. He was squinting, his vision blurring. He groaned in frustration and rubbed his eyes, dropping the book and hitting his head on the desk in front of him.

A few moments later, a deep chuckle reached his ears. "Ah, here's our Champion, hard at work."

"I'm studying," Ash muttered into the desk. "For my tests coming up."

Lance chuckled at him. "Ah yes, our future Pokémon Master."

Ash glared up at him and straightened up. "Okay, what do you want?"

"We've got that meeting coming up in an hour. Just wanted to make sure that you're ready."

"Right." He stretched out his arms, his back popping in the process. "I didn't think that this job would be so..."

"In the office?" Lance finished for him with a chuckle. "It's not as bad as you've been getting. There's a lot going on now. As your mentor, and as the Johto Champion, I have to say you've been doing a good job. It's easy to see you'd rather not be behind a desk, but you still do it." He raised an eyebrow. "Not that you plan on sticking around for very long."

Ash's cheeks turned red, and he couldn't help but feel defensive. "It's not—I don't think this is just a stepping stone or anything!" In fact, he probably could be very happy as only a Champion, but all

his life he wanted to be the Pokémon Master. It wasn't just that though. Not anymore. "As the Kanto Champion, it's really only Kanto I can make a difference in, and Red can still veto me anytime he wants." He looked up and met Lance's eyes. "I know I can do more."

Lance stared at him for a moment before nodding his agreement. "You're right. You can, and I'm going to do everything in my power – that's also legal – to help you."

"I thought you and Red were friends." Ash raised an eyebrow at him.

Lance sat down in the chair opposite Ash, and said, "I've been watching you for a very long time. I always told the other champions that there was something else to you. Something more. I wanted to make you a part of the G-Men. Turns out I didn't need to. You're more than that. Red was what we needed back then, but I think that you're what we need right now."

Ash opened his mouth to speak but found that the words couldn't come out. His cheeks burned a bit again, and the room felt a little too warm. He wanted to open a window, or go somewhere else for a while. It was what a part of him wanted to hear, but at the same time, it was too much. He really wished that Pikachu had chosen to stay with him instead of running around the Pokémon daycare on the top floor.

Lance seemed to catch on to his mild panic, and said, "You know one of the best qualities a leader can have?"

"What's that?" Ash asked.

"The ability to make genuine connections to others. Going it on your own doesn't work. Old prophecies and fancy powers mean nothing in the long run. That's not who you are. You know your weaknesses, and willingly embrace them, keeping others close to cover for them. You care and listen to others. That is what we need now." Lance stared at him seriously. "Does that at all sound like Red anymore?"

"No," Ash said immediately.

"Exactly. That's why I want to help you." Lance looked around at the clock in the room. "And not to cut this talk short, but we have a meeting to get to."

Ash groaned and slumped down in his chair, pushing away the book he had been studying. Lance just laughed at him.

...

The light was bright at the top of Mount Silver. The air was cold and thin, but it didn't feel dangerously so here. A small shiver ran up Ash's spine. He knew what it was like to get too high into the atmosphere without the proper protection.

Now wasn't the time to think about that though.

He walked forward, taking in the area surrounding him. If he was honest, when he pictured Mount Silver, he honestly pictured Red standing on the tippy-top of the peak precariously and having to battle around that. It was a ridiculous image, but he didn't want to let go of it.

Instead, the top of Mount Silver was apparently a crater of sorts. Tall walls of rock rose up around them, ending probably about 15 meters in the air. There was an entrance to what looked like a building in the side of the mountain, and most importantly, there was a league-standard arena before him.

Ash slowly approached it, noting that it looked rather clean and pristine. Though probably not maintained by anyone other than Red, it was probably hardly ever used.

He frowned a bit at that. He didn't want to be that type of Master.

"Pikapi."

Pikachu needn't say anything. Ash instantly caught onto the aura approaching them. It was bright, a mixture of colours from old connections that were now frayed dancing around the primarily red light. It was appropriate, really, that red was, well, Red's colour.

It also gave Ash a bit more comfort, since he knew that his was primarily blue.

He straightened his shoulders, fixing his face with a stern expression.

Seeing Red was actually a bit underwhelming, but Ash was sure that people thought the same thing about him. He wasn't exceptionally tall, his skin was incredibly pale, his black hair was a mess, his jeans were rather tattered, and his red jacket and blue hat looked rather old.

Then again, when you were *the* Pokémon Master, who was going to tell you that you had to dress to impress?

There was something intense about Red's eyes though, and it occurred to Ash that he probably wanted people to underestimate him.

They stared at one another, and Ash couldn't help but internally scowl a bit. This would have been so much easier if Red had a vicious, ugly aura like those that Ash had come to associate with particularly ugly and villainous people. He wasn't an evil person by any means.

That didn't mean that Ash was going to go easy on him.

The Master simply stared at him.

Ash waited for a moment, before calling out, "Red! I, Kanto Champion Ash Ketchum, challenge you to a Pokémon Battle for the title of Pokémon Master."

Red blinked, and if Ash wasn't mistaken, there was a tiny bit of pride coming from him. "You have passed every step in the trial to get here. I see no valid reason to turn down your challenge. Should you win, you will no longer be the Kanto Champion, and the title will revert to the past Champion. Do you understand this?"

"I do."

Red nodded. "Are you ready?"

"I wouldn't be here if I wasn't."

Another curt nod. "A six-on-six battle. You can substitute Pokémon whenever you wish. There is no referee, but the battle is recorded directly to the Pokémon League, and is viewable by all Champions and Elites live."

His stomach twisted a bit, but Ash simply nodded his head this time, fingers ghosting over his Pokéballs as Pikachu tensed at his side.

There were no other big, long-winded speeches. No calling out that the battle was about to begin. Instead, Red simply threw a Pokéball up into the air.

...

"Hey Ash?"

Ash slowly looked up from the screen filled with Pokémon stats in front of him. He eyed Misty as she approached him, a sweet smile matching her sweet tone of voice.

"What do you want?" He didn't even try to hide his suspicion.

She pouted and tugged his tablet away from him, setting it on the coffee table behind her. She twisted around and then sat down sideways across his lap. "Can't a girl just want some attention from her boyfriend?"

"A girl? Yes. You? No."

"Rude!" She flicked his nose and he laughed. "Okay fine. Would you help me hide a body?"

Ash stopped laughing and stared at her as if she had spontaneously grown another head. "Um?"

"I didn't actually kill someone...yet." She reassured him. "I'm just making sure. It's important."

"Whose body am I maybe helping you hide in the future?"

She beamed at him brightly before it was replaced by a scowl. A bit of alarm rushed through him because Ash did *not* like that look at all. It shouldn't exist on her face. Before he could say anything though, Misty took in a deep breath and started ranting. "Daisy! That's who! I swear she's going to drive me *insane*. Why did I agree to be her maid of honour?"

He tilted his head slightly. "Tracey asked me to be best man and nothing's seemed crazy?"

She huffed angrily. "That's because my sister's insane. They're not getting married anytime soon why does she need to worry about what kind of tablecloths she gets? She has a binder, Ash. A giant binder with different tabs and everything." Misty slumped back. "I want to be kind of impressed because, holy hell, I've never seen her more organized, but she's driving me nuts."

Ash rubbed her back reassuringly. "She's just excited."

"I know." She sighed, leaning her head on his shoulder. "I know and I'm happy for her. It's just...a lot right now." Misty leaned forward and grabbed his tablet again, turning on the screen. "Sorry, I know this is important. Oh! You were looking up water Pokémon?" Her eyes widened excitedly.

"Yeah. To become the Pokémon Master I have to ace *all* the Master tests, right? The water-type one is next." He smiled at her. "I was kind of hoping you could help me? I mean, you'll have to do the test too, eventually."

"Of course I will. We're a team, you know that." Misty smiled broadly. "I help you study and you help me hide bodies."

Ash laughed and shook his head. Some days he really had to wonder what he did to deserve Misty, but he wasn't going to question it.

...

Ash blinked as a Raichu appeared. This startled him a bit, because he *knew* this Raichu had to be the one that accompanied his mother and her Pikachu in their quest to find Red such a long time ago.

Pikachu actually growled a bit beside him, and looked up at Ash expectantly.

"No," he answered, grabbing a Pokéball. "Not this time." Red was letting them know that he knew what a powerfully trained Raichu could do.

It was almost like watching another person start to move. His Pokéball soared into the air, and Ash could hear his heart pounding in his chest, blood rushing through his body. Garchomp's roar as he appeared was teeth-chattering, and the Pokémon that had once been a rather goofy creature stood tall and proud.

"You know what to do," Ash said, keeping his voice low. Garchomp twitched a bit, acknowledging that he heard his trainer.

Then Raichu charged forward with a speed that no Raichu had the right to move at. His tail turned into shining steel, slamming it into Garchomp's side.

Garchomp snarled, but managed to keep himself upright. Pain rushed through his side, but he wasted no time in ignoring it, grabbing Raichu's tail and swinging the Pokémon around. Pride rushed through the dragon-type as he tossed the smaller Pokémon away, watching it skid along the ground.

He wanted to rush forward, to use his physical prowess against this weaker creature, but he felt the warning pressing through his bond with his trainer.

"He's too fast!" Ash called out to him.

The fact that there were suddenly a whole bunch of Raichu around him proved this point. Confusion rushed through Garchomp as he looked from one orange rat to the next. The confusion turned into annoyance as the real one rushed at him, hit him with a steel tail, and vanished back into the crowd of Raichu before Garchomp could turn to see him.

He felt his trainer once again press something through their bond. It was a warm feeling. Dry. Windy.

Garchomp instantly knew what his trainer wanted. They worked so hard on understanding these cues so they wouldn't have to use words.

With a great roar that shook the air around him, wind seemed to launch out of Garchomp's body, tossing the sand into the air. It swirled around them, making the sky darker, and everything harder to see in general.

The sand didn't hurt his eyes though, and he instantly could tell which was the real Raichu. He rushed forward, swiping at the creature. The Raichu yelped in pain, but managed to scurry around his feet.

Then green energy appeared in front of the Raichu, twisting into a grassy substance that was thrown at him.

Pain rippled through Garchomp as the Grass Knot unexpectedly made contact with him, and he hit the ground again. There was some kind of light surrounding the Raichu.

This time, Ash yelled out to him, "Hide!"

Garchomp immediately did that, digging into the ground and narrowly missing the explosion of energy that hit where he was a moment before.

It was impossible to see in front of him, but he had no fear. He could feel the vibrations of the Raichu walking on the ground above him, and he could feel his trainer. He closed his eyes, staying completely still as he waited for his trainer's signal.

"Now!"

Garchomp shot up through the ground, startling the Raichu and throwing it upwards.

Raichu recovered quickly, spinning around as light surrounded him again and he streaked back towards Garchomp.

The dragon-type felt his trainer press another feeling into his mind, and was quick to follow it, using Draco Meteor.

The two attacks collided, temporarily blinding them all. Garchomp heard his trainer yell to hide, and did exactly that. He dove into the ground again, tunneling through the dirt until Ash urged him to attack upwards.

He bulldozed through the ground, the attack clobbering Raichu. Garchomp watched with anticipation as the Pokémon rolled across the ground, and came to a stop. The air was tense and quiet.

Garchomp felt pride rush through him as the Raichu was recalled, roaring his approval in the air.

Ash laughed at his Pokémon's reaction, but then turned his attention back to Red. His emotions were just odd. It was a strange twist of surprised, not-at-all surprised, worry, and unless he was going crazy, Ash would have sworn he felt a bit of pride too.

Yeah, he was definitely just going crazy.

...

"Which one has the higher attack stat, Charizard or Infernape?"

"Hmm?" Ash stared at the wood on the coffee table, heavy, burning eyes following the path of the wood's grooves.

He heard the sound of ruffling papers, and an annoyed voice said, "I'm trying to help you for your fire-type test!"

It took a lot of effort to lift his eyes away from the table. Dawn was staring at him with a pout, her brow furrowed in frustration as she waved a book around in front of her. He thought about her words and a pang of guilt hit him. He had asked her to help him out while she was visiting.

Instead of apologizing, he sighed, allowing his exhaustion to pull him down. The couch and the pillow just felt so comfortable. He really just wanted to go back to bed, but he was too tired to even think about climbing up the stairs. Despite this, he managed to say, "Infernape." He closed his eyes and buried his face into the scratchy, decorative pillow.

"Normally you'd go on a rant about how these general stats are stupid because each Pokémon is an individual and technically they can't be judged this way." Her voice was soft, and not as annoyed as before. "What's wrong?"

Ash opened his eyes again, shifting so that she could see his face. He didn't make eye-contact with her though. Instead, he focused on the fabric of the pillow he was laying on, tracing the pattern

with his finger. "I'm just...tired." Guilt hit him again. "I'm sorry. I know I asked you to help but..." He trailed off and shrugged.

"Didn't sleep well?" she asked, and he actually looked at her. She was tilting her head, staring at him.

"I did, actually. I'm just still really tired." He looked almost ashamed of himself. "I had an actual list of things I needed to do today but I just...don't want to." He yawned. "I don't really want to do anything."

Dawn didn't quite know what to do, because that didn't sound like Ash at all. He was very active, and even if he was tired, he was usually able to put forth an energized-exterior. She moved from her spot on the couch and knelt in front of him. "You want me to get Pikachu? Or Misty? Or your mom?"

Ash slowly shook his head, a small smile on his lips. "No. Doesn't matter if they're here or not right now."

He watched the teenage girl get lost in thought. It was still strange to think that the girl he happened to become friends with was actually his half-sister. They looked nothing alike, but once it was pointed out to him, he could see some of his own mannerisms in her too.

"Are you allowed to go for a walk?"

His eyebrows shot up. "Am I *allowed*?"

She genuinely looked bashful, cheeks turning pink. "You're the Kanto Champion. I wasn't sure if you were just allowed to wander around on your own or if you needed – like – bodyguards or something."

Most days, Ash would have laughed hysterically at that. He snorted instead, and slowly pushed himself back up into a sitting position. "I can literally sense people around me. I can create barriers and my own attacks. A bodyguard would be useless." Though they still trailed after him during big-media events, mostly in plain clothes and unseen. He didn't need them then either.

"Yeah, but you always get into trouble anyway."

"Brat," he said affectionately and tapped her head. "You want to go for a walk?"

"I do. We've been cooped up all day! Let's stretch our legs and wander around Pallet Town for a bit." She made a face. "As long as no one makes up rumours that *we're* dating again. Cause, ew. You're my brother and too old for me."

"They don't know we're related," Ash pointed out, though he too was disgusted by the articles that appeared every time he was with one of his female friends. It was only ever the girls too. What kind of sexist crap was that? He paused in thought. "Do you want them to know?"

"That we're related?" Dawn clarified.

"Yeah."

She frowned, brow once again furrowing in thought. He waited for her answer, even as they went to the door to get their shoes. Maybe being outside would do him some good.

"I read an article on this gossip site the other day," she started, casting a glare at his startled

expression. They both tugged on their shoes. "It's related, I promise. Anyway, there were like – these stats on the different Champions around, and the results of a popularity poll. Guess who won?"

"Cynthia?" He guessed as he held the door open for her, making sure to lock it behind them.

Dawn eyed him for a moment before laughing and shaking her head. "You're being honest. That's adorable. No. It was you."

"Really?" Ash stared at her as if she was purely insane. "All I do is sit behind a desk." He really hated sitting behind that desk too. He hated that office in general, but it was part of the gig.

"Are you *kidding* me? Parents love you because you're pushing to get the rules on young trainers leaving home altered so that all places in Kanto have the same ones. The classes, then doing a test to get their license."

"That's not just me. A lot of people have been working on that." Ash waved his hand as they started walking down the road.

"It was your idea and you're in charge," she said, mimicking the dismissive action perfectly.

"Anyway, businesses love you because you've been doing a lot with the community relief programs, making them better or just going to places to help yourself. Trainers love you because you're a badass trainer." She sighed dramatically. "And apparently people think you're hot. Dunno why."

"What?" Ash asked, his voice rising in pitch dangerously. He could feel his cheeks burning, because of all things, he didn't expect that.

"Please don't break your mind over this," Dawn said, putting a hand on his shoulder. "It's what you wanted, isn't it? To make a difference?"

"Well, yeah, but things like popularity polls never even occurred to me," Ash answered honestly. He had always known that a lot of eyes were going to be following him after he became the Kanto Champion, and knew that even more would after he became the Pokémon Master. It was still mind-boggling though. He wasn't *that* interesting of a person.

Of course Lance and the other Kanto Elites, along with the ones from other regions later on, warned him about the media presence. It wouldn't just be around him, but around his friends and family too. He knew he had to be careful with what he said and did in public. It was still strange though.

Ash stopped walking, and then looked back at Dawn. "Wait a sec, what does that have to do with anyone finding out we're related?"

"Everything, though holy Mew I didn't mean to go on *that* big a tangent," she said with a shrug. "It was an example that I wanted to share anyway, but your life is slowly being picked over. I think *he* covered his tracks enough so no one will be able to call us out on being siblings but, well, it happened once. It could happen again. What happens when it all leads back to *him* though? What does that do to you and me?"

Ash understood exactly what she meant. He didn't want anyone to piece together enough information to realize that he was related to Red. There would be too many questions about favouritism and everything that he'd done would be scrutinized by the media. It probably wouldn't impact his career, but it would definitely be annoying.

Then he realized why she told him the story of the popularity poll. People were interested in him at the moment and he was getting a ton of attention (though he rarely ever saw reporters in Pallet Town – that was something to look into). If people realized Dawn was his half-sibling, it could open up a box that no one wanted open at the moment.

"It's up to you," Ash decided. "It won't change anything for me. People might question *you* a little more, calling favouritism, it's something Misty's worried about too. I'll keep quiet if you want me to." He had always urged others to pursue their own dreams and would hate to be a roadblock on Dawn's.

She hummed thoughtfully. "You know, I don't care one way or another? Like, if anyone asked me, I wouldn't deny it, but I'm not going to do some big magazine issue about it or anything." She blinked up at him. "And it's not like we have to...I mean...we could just say Jack Ketchum is our father, right?"

That was true. They didn't have to say that *Red* was their father. Jack Ketchum was no one. People had years to piece that one together, but no one did. It was doubtful that it would happen now. Sure, Ash did share a resemblance with Red, but they'd hardly be seen together enough to see the comparison directly.

"Yeah. Yeah, you're right." He smiled at her. "That's a good idea."

She nodded and then she hesitated. "I talked to him, you know? Before your battle against Tobias."

Ash raised an eyebrow and eyed her warily. "Oh?" He wasn't going to press, but he was curious.

"Yeah. My therapist thought that I needed closure with him. I think she was right." Dawn shook her head and looked up at him sadly. "I think he's just as beat up and broken as we are, but he never got the help he needed, and now it's too late for things to mend properly. You know?"

He thought about Red for a moment, his eyes straying across the hills to where the cemetery was. Hadn't he said something like that to Leaf about her own mother before? It made sense.

"I...don't really care," Ash admitted. He felt a little immature about that, but it was the truth and he wasn't about to lie to Dawn. "I'm glad *you're* better. I'm glad you talked to him. I just...don't care about him."

She nodded her head. "It's okay. No need to worry. That was a big hill *I* chose to climb, right? You'll confront him in your own way eventually." She smiled at him. "Small victories for now, right? Like maybe feeling a little more awake?"

Ash blinked. He hadn't even realized that his exhaustion – though still a bit present – wasn't nearly as bad as earlier. He chuckled a bit and said, "Guess having you for a sister is okay."

She nudged him. "Well, I guess having you for a brother is okay too."

...

Red's next Pokémon surprised Ash a bit too. The Espeon was small and slim, with a bright jewel and a very shiny coat. The Pokémon looked so tiny and frail compared to Garchomp. Ash thought to Leaf's Espeon, and he could instantly feel a difference.

This one wasn't nearly as cuddly as it seemed.

Garchomp was more than a bit amused, but felt his trainer silently warning him to be cautious. If

Pikachu could be dangerous, surely this Espeon could be too.

The two Pokémon stared at one another for a moment, before Ash urged Garchomp to make a move, despite knowing full-well that it could end up being a trap of some sort.

Garchomp lurched forward. Espeon sat down. Ash was instantly alarmed.

The dragon-type was so sure he'd be able to do his trainer proud and take this little one down too. The pain that rippled through his body as he collided with an invisible barrier caused him to roar out. He stumbled backwards, and glared at the Espeon. Only now did he notice the Pokémon's eyes glowing pink.

"Some sort of barrier," Ash mumbled to himself, brown eyes scanning the Pokémon. Psychic energy just looked like psychic energy to him, with no distinguishing differences between the different forms of shields Pokémon could make.

Maybe if they attacked it head on...no, that was a bad idea.

Panic rushed through Ash as Garchomp rushed forward, powerful meteors appearing and. He mentally cursed himself. He hadn't meant to actually *tell* Garchomp to do that.

The bond between him and his Pokémon was powerful, but it wasn't perfect.

Ash held his breath as the attack hit the shield, and vanished. Then the shield itself became visible, and he cried out in shock as it threw back Garchomp's Draco Meteor.

It slammed into the Pokémon, who roared in agony and was thrown across the ground. Ash and Pikachu both dove out of the way as Garchomp slid by them before coming to a stop. Unconscious.



And here we go, the beginning of the end of this story. This and the next two were originally one giant chapter that I had to split into three. All chapters are around the same length as this one. That's why it ends so abruptly. This is only 1/3 of the chapters. The other two will be out next Tuesday and the Tuesday after.

Yes, I actually go into the battles this time. I'm not good with battles, and if there are some small things that don't add up with game stats or anime things, just nod your head and go along with it.

Hope you guys like this one!

Til next time,

Written by Skylight Sparkle

Edited by EchidnaPower

Champion

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Ash dramatically flopped down onto the couch in his mother's living room, groaning as his face collided with the soft pillow. He heard a bit of shuffling, and looked up, ready to rant to his mother. Instead, he was met with a feather duster trying to clean off his face.

"Mimey!" he cried out, jerking away from the Pokémon. "Stop."

"Mime mime!" The Mr. Mime called out, pointing at Ash's shoes as if they had insulted him. Right, he probably should have traded those for the slippers he had here but that took so much effort.

Apparently Mr. Mime decided now would be a great time to use his psychic powers. He grabbed the sneakers off of Ash's feet, almost knocking him to the floor, and scurried out of the room. His slippers came flying from the entry way.

Ash grumbled and pulled on the slippers. He didn't have enough fight in him right now to duke it out with his mother's Pokémon.

He looked up as his mother walked into the room, all smiles and laughter, cradling Pikachu in her arms. That's where the traitor had run off to the second that they came in the door. Delia turned her attention towards him. "Long day, sweetie?"

"Mom," he whined as if he was still 10 and not 19. "Life sucks."

She tutted, shifting Pikachu into one arm, and reaching forward to flick Ash's forehead. "It does not." She gracefully sat next to him. "Though I take it today was a hard day."

"It's just...they're all...so stupid," Ash groaned out. From the way her eyebrow raised, his mother clearly hadn't been expecting that. "At the Pokémon League. I don't *understand*. I mean I'm not a politician but I've been taking some online courses so I'm not completely in over my head and I'm not the smartest person in the world but come on." He waved his arms in the air dramatically.

"Firstly, you are very smart, sweetie, and anyone who tells you otherwise is a dirty liar." How his mother could say something like that with a sweet, chirpy tone, Ash would never know. He really appreciated it though. "Secondly, you're going to need to be a little more specific."

"League politics are so messed up," he whispered out dramatically. Pikachu nodded in agreement, having been with Ash through most things. "I mean, I knew it was widespread but like...I'm not even sure the government is necessary. I'm the Champion and I have *so much* say in Arceus-damn *everything*."

"Don't swear," Delia said automatically.

"I've literally saved Arceus I'm going to use his name to curse if I want," he replied bluntly. She just shrugged. "Right, so. I just...don't get why the Champion is in charge of so much? I completely get why everything fell apart when Team Rocket took Red. The league, the gyms, and things that directly affect *Pokémon trainers*, I get that. But there should be more...I dunno..." Ash shook his head and looked at his mother helplessly. "I think I made a mistake. This isn't what I thought it'd be. I'm not made for this."

Delia frowned and set Pikachu on the couch. The Pokémon jumped up onto the back, moving behind his trainer to nuzzle him. "Ash Ketchum, you listen to me. This isn't your fault. I understand that you're frustrated, but you were given a mess to work with." She put a hand on his shoulder. "Tell me, do you think it's broken? The way things work now."

Ash snorted. "Shattered to pieces."

"Then fix it."

He blinked at her.

"Maybe the one in charge doesn't need to be you *alone*. Good companies delegate. Sure, there's a CEO, but there are many other management positions. Other people to make decisions. Maybe that's what you should focus on."

Ash thought about that. It made complete sense to him. He was the type of person that leaned on others to help fill in the gaps of his own weaknesses. It just felt right to do.

So why not do that with the Pokémon League too?

"Red would stop me," he insisted.

"Red," Delia repeated the name. Ash hoped he wasn't imagining the bitter note to her voice. "He made the league different by putting more obstacles in the way of the powerful positions, but most of it is still the same outside of that. He had to fight with the Master at the time too, but he didn't give up." She reached out and ran a hand through Ash's hair. He may have been grown, but that didn't stop him from leaning into his mother's comforting touch. "You might not want to hear it, but you are a lot like him. You have that same fierce stubbornness in you. Use it. Show him *why* you're right. Why things have to change. Or take him down and do it yourself."

A smile broke out on his face. "I dunno ma, I think I got the stubbornness from you."

Delia smiled at him, flushing a bit. "Perhaps a bit."

Ash laughed at her words. He could always count on his mother to keep his head on straight.

...

Ash inhaled sharply as he stared at his Pokémon, horror creeping through his veins. Reminding himself that there was a place right behind him where he could heal his Pokémon helped a bit. But that wasn't his only worry.

He recalled Garchomp, attaching the Pokéball to his belt as he looked at the Espeon on the field. What kind of attack was that? He'd never seen anything quite like it.

Taking a deep breath, he grabbed another Pokéball. That was fine. He had some tricks up his sleeve too. He threw the ball into the air, revealing Greninja in a flash of white light.

Greninja instantly braced himself with one hand on the ground, legs prepared to launch himself forward at a moment's notice. His eyes locked to Espeon's, narrowing a bit.

"Don't underestimate it," Ash said out loud. His Pokémon needed to hear him too at times. Only understanding his feelings and intentions wasn't always enough.

Greninja took those words to heart. He understood. He waited.

Silence befell the arena, neither Pokémon making a move, and neither trainer calling out a command. Ash silently sent Greninja as much encouragement as he could to keep the Pokémon calm. He kept his eyes locked onto Espeon though. It was this intense focus that allowed him to notice the subtle shift in Espeon's aura.

He blinked and yelled, "Dodge it!"

Greninja couldn't see what he was dodging exactly, but he trusted his trainer. A split second later, a bright pink light exploded in front of him. Greninja had already leapt up high into the air and managed to avoid the worst of it. Still, he grimaced and stumbled back to the ground.

"Watch out for that!" Ash called out to him aloud, needing to be more specific than an impression would allow. "That looked like Dazzling Gleam. Fairy-type."

Greninja nodded and zigzagged forward, never staying in one place long enough for Espeon to attack him. He got so close to being able to hit it, when light surrounded him and he ended up stopping just short of crashing into another barrier. He leapt backwards and quickly took in his new surroundings.

Ash's eyes narrowed as he stared at the Trick Room. He could feel how startled Greninja actually was, but that was okay. He silently urged Greninja to calm down, that everything was fine.

Because it was.

A smile played on Ash's lips. He wondered if Red had watched any of his past battles? "Spam Dark Pulse! Take Espeon out!"

All of Greninja's movements were slower than normal, but that didn't matter. Dark Pulse after Dark Pulse rushed at Espeon, who was surprisingly quick to dodge it, though he too had been trapped in the Trick Room.

Espeon's jewel started to glow, and a beam of light shot out of it. Greninja was quick to roll out of the way, throwing his hands in the air. The Haze that he unleashed made it nearly impossible to see.

He went back to using Dark Pulse, knowing that Espeon couldn't see him as well.

Ash felt the moment Red realized what he was doing. The Master broke his silence and said, "Espeon—!" He never got the chance to finish as the Trick Room shattered from the force of the dark-type move.

"Alright!" Ash cheered, Pikachu pumping his fist into the air beside him. "Use Double Team!"

Copy after copy of Greninja surrounded Espeon. Though the smaller Pokémon seemed startled for a moment, it opened its mouth and let out a piercing cry.

Ash gasped and clasped his hands over his ears from the noise. Pikachu whined and pressed his ears against his head.

Greninja quickly realized his mistake at allowing the piercing sound to distract him. He had no time to avoid Dazzling Gleam this time as it slammed into him. He grunted with pain as he landed on the ground a few feet from where he previously stood.

"Greninja! Are you okay?"

He held up a thumb as best as he could. He wasn't giving up yet.

Ash nodded and said, "You need to confuse it! Use Haze and Double Team together!"

Shooting forward, Greninja once again coated the field with a thick haze, as well as illusions of himself. He darted quickly around Espeon, never staying in one spot long enough for the other Pokémon to lock onto his location.

Water appeared in one of Greninja's hands, a pulsing darkness in the other. He forced the two powers together, and launched himself directly at Espeon. In that split second, he got an impression from his trainer. Forehead.

Shifting his aim slightly, Greninja slammed the water pulsing with darkness into the red jewel on the Pokémon. Espeon yowled and flew backwards, falling to the ground. Greninja flipped backwards and landed on the ground, staying tense and readying himself to jump if he needed to get away.

...

Let it be known that Ash was actually a very easy-going person who had no problem laughing at himself. That being said, he would forever deny the high-pitched squawk that came out of his mouth when he rolled off of the side of his bed and slammed into the floor.

He glared up at the ceiling above him when he heard an amused snort. His glare shifted towards Misty as his girlfriend leaned over the edge of the bed and smiled brightly at him. "Graceful."

"Listen here!" Ash said, waving his arms around wildly, though he didn't really have anything else to add. Instead, he let his arms fall to the floor as he looked around his room. His eyes flitted across the pictures, plaques, trophies, badges and so much more that were sitting on cluttered shelves and his dresser. He frowned a bit. "This place is too small."

Misty raised an eyebrow. "Your room?"

"Well...yeah," he agreed. "But, I mean, being here with mom in general." He sighed. "Having families stay together is a good thing, right? I have nothing against staying with her but the house itself is so...little. And like..." He waved around the room. "Being here makes me feel like I'm still a little kid sometimes. Not the Kanto Champion."

"So what you're saying is that you want to buy your own home," she clarified.

Ash shrugged a bit, his fingers tapping a random rhythm on the floor. "I've been thinking about it for a bit, yeah." He swallowed, brown eyes looking at her as nervousness welled up in him. "Ever thought about your dream home?"

Misty's head disappeared from his sight as her legs swung over the edge of the bed, and she flopped down onto the floor, her legs stretching out over his stomach. She set down the book that she had been reading. "I have, actually. With rebuilding the gym and our home in Cerulean, it's not that weird. I'd like a place that overlooks the water. Maybe a beach but I won't be picky if it'd look over a lake or something. But a place like Pallet Beach would be nice. You know? Quiet, private, but still close to things." She made a face. "More than one bathroom, definitely."

Ash chuckled at that. He couldn't blame her at all. "How many rooms?"

He watched as she curled her hands into loose fists, holding up a finger with each thing she said. "A kitchen. A living room. Maybe some kind of basement playroom or entertainment room or

something like that. One room for us and...maybe a few more for some other people at some point." Her face turned red and she shifted a bit.

He really wanted to tease her about her sudden shyness, but refrained. "That sounds really nice, Mist."

"What about you?" she asked, blush vanishing. "What's your dream place like?"

He hesitated, trying to find the right words as that nervousness came back. "Anywhere you are." Holy hell, he sounded like he just went through puberty again. Misty stared at him with wide eyes, and his face turned red. "Wow, that came out cornier than I meant for it to. Right. Um. Right. What I mean is...what if we could find something like that here? Or make something like that? Like...really soon? Like start looking now? I mean, only if you want to, right? Like you have lots to do and Cerulean is your home and I want to stay here and I'm not saying you have to or anything I promise it's fine I—"

Misty put her hand over his mouth to get him to stop talking, her cheeks a dark pink. "Are you...are you asking me to move into a house with you?"

He tried to talk, but her hand was in the way. Catching on, she quickly took it back and stared at him. "No!" He paused. "Wait, no, I mean, yes! I mean—I mean—" He stared at her in horror. "Can I throw myself out the window?"

Misty snorted, her shoulders shaking as she laughed. A smile spread across her face. "You know, that actually does sound kind of nice."

"Me throwing myself out the window?"

"Yes," she replied dryly, before nudging him roughly. "I meant finding a place around here. I think it'd be nice."

Okay, he was pretty sure that his heart was going to beat out of his chest. "You think so?"

Misty smiled at him softly. "Yeah. I think so."

...

Espeon didn't get back up.

Ash blinked with surprise at Red's chuckle. The man recalled Espeon, and his crimson eyes met Ash's. An uncomfortable prickle shot up Ash's spine. Red was impressed, he could tell that much for sure this time around.

Suddenly, Ash *wanted* Red to say something. Anything really. He knew that the Master was notoriously silent though.

The next Pokémon that appeared was another familiar one, and a curious choice. Snorlax.

The Pokémon lumbered around slightly before slumping onto the ground. Greninja blinked at it, and then looked back at Ash.

He weighed his pros and cons. Greninja was still in pretty good shape, and he was much faster than Snorlax. He knew that, in general, a Snorlax's defense was pretty high, and when they hit, they hit hard. His own was like that. Greninja was no push-over though.

Ash also got the distinct impression that he wanted to stay in the fight, so he nodded his hand and moved his hand away from his belt.

Snorlax looked up at Greninja, and shifted to his feet once again. Just like with Espeon, the two had a stare-down.

Ash let out a startled cry as Snorlax shot forward with a speed that couldn't possibly be real. Greninja cried out as the Pokémon's glowing fist made contact, throwing him back into the air. Ash twisted around, watching as the Pokémon slammed into the side of the mountain and then fell down, unmoving.

...

He didn't scream as he woke up, but that came more from the fact that Ash felt like he couldn't breathe properly. It took him a few minutes to calm himself, to convince himself that the faces he swore were looming over him – the faces of the people he let down – weren't actually real.

That didn't stop him from swearing that Ritchie was staring at him from the corner of his room.

A sob escaped Ash's throat as he launched himself out of his bed, desperately clawing his clothes on. He needed to go. It was all too much.

He stumbled out of his room, completely missing the yellow blur that had been trying to get his attention. He didn't really remember getting down the stairs, but soon he was outside, the cool air filling his lungs.

He needed to run, so that's exactly what he did. He ran and ran, not really caring where he was going. The destination wasn't the point. He only stopped when his foot ended up getting caught in an uplifted tree root, causing him to slam into the ground.

Ash took several deep breaths, slowly moving to push himself up. He cried out as pain rushed through his ankle, falling sideways again.

He managed to move himself so that he was leaning against a tree and took a deep breath again, hugging himself. Ash winced at the sight of the scrapes on his arms, but it wasn't actually that bad.

"Pikapi?"

Ash jumped and looked over as Pikachu scampered up to him, ears flattening as he eyed his arm. Pikachu didn't ask anything, he simply climbed up onto him, nuzzling his cheek against Ash's.

That's when the tears came. Ash's entire body shuddered. "It's too much. I'm so stupid. Why did I think becoming a Champion right now would be a good idea? I can't do this. I don't think I ever could."

He heard an unimpressed sigh and looked over as Ria sat next to him. She definitely disagreed with him.

More movement caught his attention, and Ash realized that more and more of his Pokémon were surrounding him. It hit him that he ended up running to Professor Oak's ranch without realizing it.

None of them said anything, but Ash felt his eyes begin to droop. He felt safe with them. He felt at peace.

With them, he remembered exactly why he knew he could be a good Champion, and a good

Pokémon Master.

...

"Pikapi," Pikachu mumbled, his ears flattening

Ash stared at his Pokémon numbly, reaching out with his aura to check on him. Surprise rushed through him when he got a response.

Greninja slowly pushed himself up, stumbling forward to the arena and into a standing stance. Everything ached, but he wasn't about to back down yet. He let his trainer know that very clearly through their bond.

Ash breathed out and closed his eyes for a moment before saying, "Use your speed!"

Though much slower than before, Greninja leapt into the air and out of Snorlax's reach with surprising grace. His Water Shuriken appeared in his hands as he streaked down at the Pokémon quickly, the attack landing and causing Snorlax to flinch away. Hit, evade. Hit, evade. It was a pretty simple strategy.

Unfortunately, Greninja wasn't expecting Snorlax to stomp on the ground, causing the ground to shake and for a sea of rocks to rush into the air. Greninja winced as the rocks slammed into him, tossing him around as he tried to get his footing, but was unable to.

Slamming into the ground, he found himself looking at Ash as his vision faded, sad that he couldn't battle any longer.

"You did good," Ash muttered as he finally recalled Greninja. He expected his Pokémon to be down after Snorlax's first hit, and was impressed at how long he had lasted.

...

"My mom's an amazing person," Ash said, leaning forward a bit. "She didn't deserve everything that happened to her."

"Pi," Pikachu agreed as he snacked on an overly large cookie on the floor.

His therapist eyed the Pokémon with a bit of amusement before nodding her head. "I'm glad that you have such a strong bond with your mother, especially considering your relationship with your father."

Ash snorted at that. "Nonexistent?" He shrugged. "You know what? I get it. I actually do get why he made some of the choices he did. He's still stupid though. Still an asshole."

"And it's okay to see him as that," she reminded him gently. "Your opinions and beliefs are entirely valid."

"You know, I was always curious about my father and wondered why he wasn't there. It really hurt and sucked when I was younger, but now I realize, there was never a time I actually needed him, you know? My mom was always enough. And my friends...they mean everything to me."

His therapist smiled at him warmly. "I can tell how much you care about your friends, Ash. It's good to have people to lean on."

He nodded eagerly, his smile fading a bit. "I know it was their choice, but they still followed me

through hell. So many of them lost so much."

"And you feel responsible for it?"

"In a way," he agreed. "Misty said it's because I have a big heart but she's biased."

"Do you think she's right?"

Ash was positively tickled by the question. "If you ask her, she's always right." He lowered his voice in a whisper. "Don't tell her, but she's really not." His voice raised again. "Well, in this case, she probably is. She's a hypocrite though, because she's the same."

"How do you view your communication with Misty about things like that? Especially things where your opinions differ."

"We argue a bit," Ash admitted with a small shrug. "Just a little bit of snark, nothing that tries to be hurtful. Not on purpose. We fight sometimes, but we have this rule. The rule is that we can cool down, but we don't leave the house we're in angry. Well, maybe outside, but not out of the yard. Sometimes if we're in the same room like a hotel, we just go to opposite sides of the room to cool off. Then we talk. The rule is never go to sleep angry."

This actually seemed to startle her. "That type of communication system for someone your age is very impressive. You should both be proud of yourselves."

Ash felt the blush crossing his cheeks. "Misty was my first girlfriend, and we were really young too. You know – preteens who turn red when they hold hands and internally die from a tiny kiss once in a while. We had to figure out how to talk since she was in Cerulean and I was... everywhere." There was a question lingering on his lips, and he wasn't quite sure how to word it properly, but if there was anyone he could ask, it was his therapist. "Some people think that it's bad that we started so young and didn't...take a break or anything. Do you think so?"

She leaned back a bit in her chair and regarded him carefully. "Time and time again you've given me small anecdotes on your relationship with Misty, and the ways you two communicate, work together, and respect one another. Some people may say 'well, how do you know you love someone if you haven't dated other people to see', but there is no wrong way to do a consenting relationship. Sometimes you get lucky the first time around. Sometimes you don't. Sometimes it doesn't matter. On a personal note, I think your relationship sounds very healthy, but the only ones who can judge that in the end are you and Misty." She shook her head. "Don't let someone else's opinion influence you."

No, that didn't sound like something that he'd do anyway, let alone with something so important. It was still nice to hear from another person though.

...

"Pikapi," Pikachu spoke up pleadingly.

"No. Not yet." Ash's eyes never left the Snorlax as he grabbed his next Pokéball. "Let's go, Sceptile."

As the grass-type appeared, Ash felt a sudden stab of startled realization coming from Red. He looked at the Master, who was staring at Sceptile as if he was the last piece of a puzzle.

"The same Pokémon you used against Team Rocket," Red spoke out loud. It was still odd to hear his voice. He made no other comment, but that was fine by Ash. He was actually *glad* that Red had

pieced together what he was doing.

His choice in Pokémon actually meant something, after all.

If Ash was surprised to hear Red speak a moment ago, he was even more surprised to hear him again. "Snorlax. Rest."

Alarm shot through Ash as Snorlax fell onto the ground, no doubt counting on his high defense to keep him safe. All of Greninja's work would be for nothing if he didn't do something quickly.

"Don't let him heal!" Ash burst out.

Sceptile prided himself on his speed and strength. He didn't need a command to know to use his Agility to move as quickly as he could. The leaves on his arms hardened into sharp blades, and he leap up into the air.

Not having completely fell asleep yet, Snorlax managed to roll out of the way. Ash didn't let the speed startle him this time, nor did Sceptile. Instead, the Pokémon threw his arms into the air, a shower of sharp leaves raining down on his opponent.

Snorlax groaned as the leaves assaulted him, but didn't waste time in sliding the rocks across the ground in the same wave that had taken down Greninja.

Sceptile felt the silent warning coming from Ash and was quick to leap across the largest stones, striking Snorlax with his Leaf Blade again. Like Greninja before, Sceptile would strike and then jump back away from Snorlax. Sceptile didn't need to be told that this wasn't a completely solid strategy though, which was why he kept Snorlax busy with his Leaf Storm as well.

Somehow, Snorlax still managed to get up, using his surprising speed to rush at Sceptile.

Ash smirked, shifting slightly.

Sceptile matched his stance with a smirk of his own. He held his ground as Snorlax came at him, and then ducked down low, swinging out his leg in a Low Sweep.

Snorlax stumbled forward from both the power and simply being tripped while moving so quickly. Sceptile quickly swung around, kicking him once again from behind. The large Pokémon slammed into the ground with a crash that made the ground shake under their feet.

Snorlax moved to get up, but Sceptile wasn't having any of that. He wasn't about to fail. He rushed at the Pokémon and swung his Leaf Blade again, making contact with his head and knocking him out.

Pride swept through Sceptile at Ash's cry of victory. He smirked and crossed his arms, waiting for Red's next move.

Ash shook his head at Sceptile's smugness, and then focused on Red. It was curious, how he seemed to actually be enjoying himself. Ash had to wonder when was the last time he had a battle where he didn't steamroll everyone.

Despite how tense Ash felt, and how brutal things had been so far, he was extremely proud of all of his Pokémon, and battling with them like this was kind of fun. The ones that were conscious seemed to agree with him, sending warm feelings his way.

Red chuckled and tossed his next Pokéball into the air. Immediately, Ash felt a rush of anxiety,

something all of his Pokémon were quick to notice.

...

"What are you doing?"

Ash blinked open his eyes, coming face to face with a pair of black boots. He looked up, meeting Leaf's confused eyes. He had to admit, the scene probably looked really strange. He was sitting cross-legged with his eyes closed, while his Pokémon took turns battling one another.

"We're practicing with our aura bonds," Ash explained, stretching his legs out. "See, I can't talk to them directly with aura. It's not a psychic power. What I can do is send *feelings* or impressions across the bond. We're working out system so I can communicate with them better during battles. It takes a lot of time and practice."

"So you were telling them what to do." Leaf turned to look at the Pokémon. "Are you still doing that?"

"No, I can't multitask that well." He felt pride well up in him. "They're improvising themselves. It's something we're working on too. They *know* me, and I know them. I trust them to make the right call if they see an opportunity that I may miss, just like they do with me." He turned his eyes towards Leaf again. "You wanna battle later? See if your Pokémon can stand up to mine like this?"

Leaf snorted as she sat next to him, nudging him gently. "I won't go easy on you."

"Good." He sigh and flopped backwards, staring up at the sky. "So I have a question. It's a bit strange but...yeah...I think you could answer this for me better than anyone else."

"Shoot."

"Do you think I'm going the right thing by going after Red so soon? Or should I just stay where I am? You know, get some more experience as Champion first?" It was a question that had been plaguing his mind. It was something that Lance had voiced, but not in a discouraging way. His mother and Misty had voiced their encouragement towards his goals, but he wanted someone to be a little more blunt and realistic with him.

Leaf leaned back slightly, tilting her head towards the sky. "Well, there would be pros to sticking it out as Champion. Less people would think you're using it as a stepping stone – which is stupid by the way since you've been doing a ton since you beat Lance. You'd get the layout of the league better. You'd probably get more people on your side at that level. However, you'd also be under Red's thumb, and I think that holds you back a lot. You second guess what you want to do because —"

"Red would stop me," Ash finished for her. It was something he had voiced many times before. "You're right. It's just...it's a lot."

"It is. More importantly, it matters if *you* think you can handle it or not. You went through a lot Ash, we all did." She frowned. "I'd hate to see you crash and burn because some ass tried to use that against you. I'd actually fight them. I'd get Misty and Brock to help too."

"Not Gary?"

"Gary's a wet noodle." Ash snorted and she nodded towards his Pokémon. "What do they think? Or what do they feel?"

That was a good question. He turned his eyes towards the large group of Pokémon. "What do you think? Champions? Or do we become Masters?"

The emotions and verbal responses he got in return were overwhelming, and it made him feel a little silly for ever questioning it.

They always said that they were going to be masters together, and that's exactly what they were going to become."

...

Venusaur. This Pokémon was Red's starter, and arguably his most powerful Pokémon, though perhaps his notorious Blastoise and Charizard could fall into that category too. Why was he sending it out now? Blastoise had the type disadvantage, so that made sense, but why not Charizard? Unless he didn't have Charizard with him. Ash sincerely doubted that though.

A thought nagged at the back of his mind that Red had a strategy, but he brushed that aside because that was obvious.

Those thoughts rushed through Ash's mind quickly, which was good, since Venusaur didn't hesitate for a moment.

Sceptile moved quickly to meet the vines that came snapping at him, slashing at them with his blades. He moved swiftly to counter them, always staying on the move. Though Venusaur had more vines and hit harder, Sceptile's blades were fairly effective in keeping them away, as was his superior speed.

A feeling swept over Sceptile, and he knew it was coming from Ash. He jumped out of range and unleashed his Leaf Storm. At the same time, Venusaur did the same things.

The arena, already a ripped up mess of tunnels and rocks, became barely visible as the two Leaf Storms collided.

Back on the side, Ash quickly moved Pikachu behind him, not wanting his Pokémon to get hit when he wasn't even battling.

Sceptile was startled as a cloud of purple dust suddenly rushed through the leaves. He coughed and snorted as he stumbled back. He just barely opened his eyes in time to see the vines rushing at him again. Sceptile fought back with his blades, but he was much slower this time.

Ash couldn't see Venusaur or Red anymore from the mess of leaves and purple haze (no doubt Poison Powder). Instead, he closed his eyes and focused on the Pokémon.

Alarm rushed through him as he felt energy gathering. His eyes shot towards the open sky above them. Though still cold, the sun was peeking through the clouds now.

"Sceptile!" He yelled out. "He's gathering sunlight!" Get below the vines and stop him was what Ash wanted to yell, but he couldn't. Red would counter that too easily. He tried to get an impression across to his Pokémon, but this wasn't one that they had gone over before.

Sceptile seemed to get the message though. The Pokémon, though still dizzy and a little slower than normal, pushed forward to get closer to Venusaur. He leapt up into the air, and immediately realized that he had done the wrong thing when he felt Ash's panic hit him.

The translation to go low hadn't made it through. It was times like this when Ash really wished that

he could directly talk to all of his Pokémon in their minds. He didn't have psychic abilities though.

Venusaur tilted forward so that Sceptile could see the flower on his back, a bright glow coming from the middle of it. Time seemed to slow down for the Pokémon before a powerful beam of light hit him.

Ash felt like he was watching in slow motion too as Sceptile arched through the air, flying backwards from the sheer ferocity of the Solar Beam. Ash had never seen one that powerful before, not even from his own Pokémon. He stared numbly at Sceptile's back as the Pokémon careened towards him.

Ash blinked, realizing what was about to happen a split second before it did, and threw his hand out towards Pikachu. The Aura Shield he put around his non-battling Pokémon stopped him from getting the brute force of Sceptile crashing into him, but Ash hadn't even thought of extending it to himself.

Time sped up again, and Sceptile slammed into Ash. Both of them flew backwards, hitting the ground and skidding along it.

"Pikapi!" Pikachu cried out in alarm, quickly running back to where his trainer had landed.

Ash blinked, staring up at Pikachu. He shifted a bit, only for pain to rush through him. He looked down at Sceptile, who was completely unconscious on top of him, the pressure making his ribs hurt.

With a shaking arm, he grabbed Sceptile's Pokéball and called him back. The release of pressure made him gasp and cough as he managed to sit up, pressing one arm to his ribs. Yeah, at least one of them had to be broken.

"Pikapi!" Pikachu cried out again, nudging him. Ash slowly smiled at the Pokémon, and pushed himself to his feet shakily. A part of him wanted to just flop back to the ground and whimper in pain for a bit, but now wasn't the time for that.

He stepped back into the challenger's box that was mapped out with paint on the ground, still keeping one arm wrapped around himself. Ash tried to orient himself again, focusing on everyone that was around him. He wasn't at all surprised to feel how concerned and frustrated Pikachu was with him, but he was surprised to feel the concern from both Red and Venusaur.

He looked at the large Pokémon, who was staring at him with a combination of shame and horror. Ash blinked at the Pokémon, took a shaky breath that hurt only a little bit, and said, "It's okay. It wasn't your fault. It happens in battles."

Red seemed surprised that Ash was addressing his Pokémon directly, but didn't stop him. Ash wouldn't have cared if he did try to stop him. What kind of person would leave a Pokémon feeling as badly as Venusaur did alone?

"Let's go, Buddy," Ash said.

Pikachu was a bit surprised at first, but then quickly darted forward.

Venusaur blinked down, still very much startled by the whole event. Ash had to wonder if Red's Pokémon knew who *he* was in regards to their trainer? Did they know that Ash was Red's son? Would it have mattered to them at all?

Venusaur collected himself, and then struck with his vines again.

"You know what to do!" Ash called out to Pikachu.

The Pokémon smirked as he streaked forward, faster than any of Ash's other Pokémon. Apparently faster than the average Pikachu, since Red was clearly startled by this.

Pikachu didn't just go over or under the vines. No, he zigzagged left and right, up and down, forwards and backwards. Pikachu wove around the vines, twisting them into knots.

Pikachu's tail started to glow, lining itself with iron as he flipped around, nearly severing one of the vines. Venusaur recoiled slightly.

Venusaur shifted around, taking aim at Pikachu and unleashing his Solar Beam. Pikachu was quick to spin around, throwing a powerful Electro Ball at the attack before rushing to the side. The two attacks slammed into one another, causing both Venusaur and Pikachu to skid backwards slightly.

'Ash.'

He nearly jumped when Ria's voice entered his mind. Though he could directly talk to her since she could use Aura the same way he could, he simply acknowledged her with a feeling instead of words.

'Send me out,' she insisted. **'Pikachu is doing amazing, but you know who he'd be better against. You know what's coming.'**

Ash weighed the pros and cons, before deciding to trust in his Pokémon. Venusaur was powerful, and Ash didn't want Pikachu to get worn out when he had an advantage against *both* of Red's remaining Pokémon (or the Pokémon Ash thought he had with him). Ria wasn't nearly as experienced or powerful as Pikachu was, but she was unlike anything Red would have ever encountered before.

"Pikachu! Come back!" Ash called out. He couldn't help but feel a little smug at the fact that him recalling Pikachu apparently startled Red too.

His friend returned to his side without a question, trusting in him. Ash tossed his Pokéball up into the air, unleashing Ria.

The tiny Lucario stood up straight and fixed her glittering bow that held her mega stone.

'I'm not going to Mega Evolve,' she insisted. **'You're hurt as is and won't be able to take the pain if I get hit. Do you understand?'**

Ash wanted to argue, but he did. His connection with Ria was *too* strong when she Mega Evolved. He felt every ounce of pain she did, and it often ended up leaving him a mess, if not passed out.

'Venusaur is strong. Don't underestimate him, and hit hard,' Ash responded.

Venusaur was unable to untangle some of his vines, which put Ash at a distinct advantage that way. Instead, Venusaur used his Solar Beam to try and stop Ria in her tracks.

Ria threw her hand into the air, and the Solar Beam slammed into her invisible shield. She skidded back a few steps, but managed to stay upright.

A smirk played on her mouth as she shot forward, using her Extreme Speed to shatter her own shield and get close to Venusaur before he could stop her. She was a blur as she hit the Pokémon again and again.

Ria winced as she was surrounded by a Leaf Storm, and recoiling as one of them struck her eyes. She formed a shield around herself.

'Ria,' Ash spoke to her directly, 'keep your shield up to keep the leaves away and get in the air above him when he tries to use Solar Beam again.'

She listened to the rest of the plan, and smirked again. Her shield wavered as she moved. Unlike her trainer, who could shield others without much thought or effort (though apparently that didn't always apply to himself, the idiot), she struggled with it. Her strength was in the power behind her attacks.

She threw herself up into the air, and looked down to see the light starting to form in Venusaur's flower again, just like Ash predicted. Her Aura Sphere formed in her hand, and she slammed it down on the flower before Venusaur could attack.

The Pokémon roared out in pain as both the Aura Sphere and the energy behind the Solar Beam rushed through him.

Ria landed on the ground, kneeling down as she watched Venusaur collapse. Everything was still for a moment, before Red actually laughed. He didn't add any type of congratulations, but Ria couldn't help but be proud that she had taken down his first ever Pokémon. It didn't matter if Sceptile wore him down, and Pikachu made it hard for him to fight back. She was the one that did it.



Til next time,

Written by Skylight Sparkle

Edited by EchidnaPower

Ash

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

There was a sickening crunch underneath Ash's feet, though he didn't dare look down to see what it was. On his shoulder, he heard Pikachu whine, and if his hair wasn't standing on-end already, it would have been now.

This was the first time that he had led the G-Men on a mission like this, and it made his gut twist. Over and over again, he insisted that he wasn't built for this. Yeah, he could face down legendary Pokémon, and he had dealt with regional crime rings many different times, but this was different.

He couldn't goof up. He couldn't make a mistake. Every instinct he had told him to run ahead, to check it out without getting the small team of men and women with him in danger. That was usually what he did.

This team had his back, he knew that, but it was different with his friends. Even when he went off on his own to do something stupid, he knew they wouldn't judge him, that they'd support him.

Of course, his friends also didn't come armed with rifles. That was something he was immensely uncomfortable about, and refused to have any type of weapon himself. He had his Pokémon, and though they didn't know it, he had his Aura. Again, they didn't know that, so instead of actually leading up front, he was walking in the middle of everyone else.

The cave smelled of something sickly, though he wasn't exactly sure what. Not that he really wanted to know, but they'd probably find out. As the Kanto Champion, he was *also* in charge of the Kanto G-Men, which was ten kinds of crap that he was trying to fix behind the scenes. Until then though, things kept running as they were and he was in charge.

How Lance had managed to deal with two regions for over twenty years was beyond him.

Ash closed his eyes for a moment, and that's when he felt it. He came to a stop and was about to call out to those with him, but it was too late. A man came out from a side part of the cave, crashing into one of the armed men. There was a yell and the sound of loud guns.

The sound seemed to bounce around in Ash's head. None of them were hurt, but the rogue Team Rocket grunt that they had tracked (who had been causing some trouble in the area lately) was injured and now unconscious.

Ash rubbed his fingers together, trying to keep himself calm. They still had to check for the weapons and stolen Pokémon that were supposed to be in this cave. They still had a job to do.

At least in the dark no one noticed his hands shaking.

He held it together through the trip back to the Indigo League. He held it together through the trip back home. Honestly, it was probably Pikachu's constant presence – his cooing and gentle pats on the head and cheek – that kept Ash from freaking out before hand.

The second that he walked through the door and saw Misty, who was very focused on a documentary about water Pokémon, he lost it.

He must have made some kind of noise, because she jumped and stared at him with wide eyes. A

split second later, she had thrown herself off of the couch and grabbed a hold of him. She said something, but he didn't respond as he put his head on her shoulder. He was a crying, shaking mess that could still hear the loud bang of a gun. It took everything he had not to look at Misty's abdomen and the scar that still lingered there.

"I can't do this," Ash choked out. "I can't."

"What happened?"

"I just...the G-Men. I can't—I can't."

Misty didn't shush him, which he was thankful for. She let him crack, but made sure to hold onto him tight enough so that he wouldn't fall to pieces. That was really all that he could ask of her.

...

Blastoise appeared next, and though it would have made sense for her to go back and have Pikachu take on this beast, Ria felt confident that she could take on this one too.

Without waiting for Ash to give her instructions, Ria used her Extreme Speed to rush forward again. Blastoise used his canons to unleash powerful torrents of water that Ria dodged with ease.

'Wait!' Ash mentally called out to her. **'He's not aiming for you!'**

The entire arena filled with water, even the deep tunnels that Garchomp had created. Ria jumped on top of one of the rock piles that had been created, eyeing the water before her. It wasn't deep, but it would certainly slow her down slightly.

Who was she kidding? She'd be fine.

Ria took the opportunity to jump down and rush at Blastoise. An Aura Sphere formed in her hands as she neared him.

Then he withdrew into his shell.

Ria stumbled forward, coming to a stop. She still let her Aura Sphere fly, but it did nothing to the thick shell.

'Ria,' Ash spoke to her.

'No! I can do this!' she insisted stubbornly. **'I just need to get him out.'**

"Luca," Ria spoke out loud to the Blastoise. "Cari lu ca lucario." Come out you coward.

Ash bit his lip as Ria taunted the Pokémon against his better judgment, like a stubborn teenager that refused to listen to her father. Ash was well aware that he could be dense at times, but not when it came to battles. Whatever Red was doing, Ria taunting Blastoise had to be a terrible idea.

"Stop!" Ash said out loud. He took a deep breath. **'Wait a minute. Take a knee.'**

Ria didn't want to do that at all, but chose to trust him. She bounded back to the rock she had been waiting on earlier, kneeling down but ready to jump at a moment's notice.

Ash eyed Blastoise. He wasn't storing energy, nor did hiding in his shell heal anything (not that he needed to be healed yet). No, he was just waiting and biding his time. Something Ash didn't like at

all. They had to flush him out of there somehow. Ria knew how to harness a Dragon Pulse, and could possibly try that.

Ria took that as an order rather than him just thinking of possibilities. She shot forward again, ready to attack.

"Use your shield!" Ash yelled. His pulse spiked the second she started moving, knowing that it was a mistake.

It was too late.

Powerful torrents of water slammed into her as Blastoise unleashed his Hydro Pump. She was thrown into the air, but managed to land rather neatly rather than just skidding across the wet ground. Her pride at this didn't last long as the icy wind and snow of a Blizzard surrounded her, freezing the ice around her feet and trapping her there.

Ria gathered energy in her hand to break her feet free, but she was too slow. Blastoise stomped on the ground and it began to shake beneath her feet. She cried out in alarm as the ground split and shifted under her, a spike of earth rushing up and slamming into her. She broke free of the ice, but was hit by the shifting again and again.

Panic erupted inside of her, and Ash was saying something to her, but she couldn't focus on that. She scrambled to use her shield, but landed on another part of the shifting ground head-first.

Spots of black surrounded her vision, and shame rushed through her as she lost consciousness.

'I'm sorry.'

Ash was quick to recall Ria. He didn't want to feel bitter about his Pokémon. He loved her to death, having raised her from an egg in a way that he didn't with other Pokémon that he had hatched. Their connection was different, and she was different. That made her like a stubborn child that didn't always listen, so he was a little bit bitter.

He grimaced as he moved, ribs protesting. He had a headache now too. They were both down to two Pokémon, but it had taken three of his to bring down Venusaur, and Blastoise had just used three ridiculously powerful attacks in a row to take down Ria, who had been fully energized.

He stared at the utterly destroyed arena. No doubt Red would have to do some work to seriously fix it up when they were done. Ash stared at the water that surrounded even his feet. It was smart. He supposed that Red and Blastoise thought that it would discourage him from using Pikachu's electric attacks so that he wouldn't get shocked too.

Ash wanted to laugh at that. Red should have known by now just how little he cared about putting himself in harm's way (not to mention he could shield himself).

He nodded pointedly towards the ground that had risen up from the Earthquake. Pikachu knew exactly what to do. He rushed into the arena, jumping from rock to rock, staying above the water. He didn't stop moving, circling around Blastoise again and again.

The water-type Pokémon once again stomped on the ground, shattering parts of the stone and causing others to rise out of the ground. Pikachu was quick to use it to his advantage instead of it being his natural weakness.

With increased speed, he jumped from stone to stone, avoiding being crushed by the dirt or stumbling into the water. It was difficult, but at the same time, not at all tiring to Pikachu. He knew

that he was so much stronger than he looked. He just needed to keep going, because Pikapi had a plan and they were going to see it through.

Though Pikachu couldn't actually hear Pikapi's words in his mind like Ria (a lot of good it did her), he definitely had the strongest bond with his trainer. What Pikapi wanted came to his mind very clearly, unlike some of the others.

The fur on his tail once again turned into gleaming iron as he jumped through the air, spinning around and hitting Blastoise's face before quickly launching himself out of the way, using his superior speed to stay out of the way.

Pikachu did this twice more, though on the last time Blastoise almost managed to hit him with a jet of water.

"Come on," Ash mumbled under his breath as he watched the battle carefully. He knew that Red was weighing his options too. Pikachu might have been much smaller, and unevolved, but that didn't mean anything in the long run. Pikachu was powerful and had both the type and speed advantage. Ash let his eyes flicker from the Pokémon to Red. "Come on, do it. It's your only option."

Red muttered something that Ash couldn't hear, but apparently Blastoise could. The water-type turned towards Pikachu, who held his ground for a moment.

Blastoise unleashed an icy attack of freezing wind and snow. Pikachu was quick to jump from his spot, running away from the Blizzard as quickly as he could.

Pikachu could feel the ice nipping at his tail as he hurled himself from rock to rock. It was only when he got back to the place that he started, having ran around Blastoise in a circle, that he dodged behind a rock and waited for the attack to end.

When the wind died down, Pikachu peeked around the corner and saw that all of the water, except for a tiny pool around Blastoise's feet, had frozen solid. Pikachu's ears perked up and a smirk identical to the one Pikapi was sporting spread across his face. "Chuu."

Electricity surrounded Pikachu, and he pushed himself off of the rocks, using the ice to gain speed. He felt like he was *flying* at Blastoise.

The larger Pokémon unleashed his Hydro Cannons at Pikachu, who simply narrowed his eyes, leapt into the air, and spun around rapidly. The electricity that had been pulsing off of his body surrounded him like a shield, allowing him to cut through the water with ease.

Electricity pouring off of him, tail still iron, Pikachu spun around and slammed himself into Blastoise's face. The large Pokémon tried to avoid the attack, but ended up stumbling over the edge of the ice that surrounded him, falling backwards and hitting the ground.

Blastoise was quick to hide in his shell.

"Get him buddy!" Ash yelled out loud.

Pikachu snickered as he jumped into Blastoise's shell and unleashed a powerful thunderbolt, the shell preventing it from rushing through the ice and water to the their trainers.

Pikachu jumped out of the shell as quickly as he jumped in. Blastoise came out after him hauling his fist back to slam into the smaller Pokémon's side. Pikachu latched onto his arm and attacked him with Thunder again.

"Pi!" Pikachu squeaked in surprise as he was tossed away. Pain hit him hard as he slammed through some of the rocks, and then skidded across the ice until he stopped in front of Pikapi.

"Pikachu!" Ash cried out in alarm.

"Pi!" Pikachu responded as he pushed himself up onto all fours. It hurt, but he gritted his teeth and got back up, glaring at the Blastoise who had fallen to the ground after tossing Pikachu.

Ash narrowed his eyes at Blastoise, who seemed to be trying to push himself back up. He held his breath, waiting on giving Pikachu another command. There was no point in attacking another Pokémon if it was already beaten, but he still wanted to remain on his guard just in case.

Finally, Blastoise slumped forward unconscious.

"Yeah!" Ash cried out, and Pikachu cheered just as excitedly.

...

"Pi pika, Pikapi!" Pikachu said excitedly while pointing at a sign above a shop.

Ash looked at it. It was a nice little building, though the business was clearly new. There was room to grow and improve, but it was a great way to start, especially in a place like Viridian City.

Honestly, it amused him a bit that this was where he ended up. Hiding in plain sight. It was really smart.

A happy jingle rang through the air as he pushed the glass door open. There was no one inside, but there were plush chairs in a small waiting area.

There was a man hunched over a tall desk, his periwinkle hair pulled back into a short ponytail. He was typing at a computer, green eyes focused as he said, "Just one moment please."

There was a Meowth facing away from him, apparently counting a little cash box.

"Sorry about that, I just had to finish up an order form," the man said cheerfully, not yet looking up. "Do you have an appointment?"

"Not exactly."

The man's eyes shot up, going comically wide when they met his own. He gasped dramatically, waving his hands in the air. "It's the Twerp!"

Ash snickered as Meowth jumped and spun around, eyes locking with Pikachu's, who simply waved (though Ash could feel the sarcasm). A head of magenta hair appeared from around the corner as Jessie appeared, looking as equally flabbergasted as James did. "Twerp! What are you doing here?"

Ash leaned his arms on the desk. "Champion Twerp, actually." Even if he didn't have his aura, he would have been able to tell just how nervous they suddenly were. "You know, you guys were really hard to track down."

Jessie walked forward, putting her hands on her hips. "Oh, and why did you track us down? We have a deal with the Pokémon League—"

"Lance," Ash corrected.

"Wha?"

"You had a deal with Lance," he replied nonchalantly. "Not me. I'm the Champion in Kanto. Not him, and I mean, you *did* stalk me for nearly eight years."

All three of them stared at him with suddenly horrified eyes. It took all his willpower to not laugh. Instead, he kept a stern expression on his face. "That's why I wanted to come here." They were literally sweating. He really shouldn't be getting this type of amusement from them but come on. It was Jessie, James, and Meowth.

His serious façade vanished, replaced with the large smile that had been threatening to take hold this entire time. "I wanted to make sure that you were okay, and to thank you."

"Huh?" All three of them said together.

Ash shrugged and motioned to Pikachu. "I mean, you *did* try to steal Pikachu a lot—"

"Cha!" Pikachu agreed with a stern expression.

"—And a lot of other Pokémon," Ash continued. "You put us in some really bad situations, and teamed up with other bad guys, and stalked a child across a ton of regions – which is really creepy guys come on." He shook his head at their confused looks, because none of that sounded like something he should be thanking them for. "But, when it really mattered, you always did the right thing. You saved my life loads of times – you helped save the world more than once even if you didn't really know it. After what you did with Yung and Giovanni...I wanted to thank you."

Meowth looked down towards the floor. "I gots some dust in my eye."

"So, we're not in trouble?" Jessie asked slowly, while James looked like he was struggling to find the right words to say.

Ash chuckled and shook his head. "No. Like I said, I just wanted to make sure you were okay. Good or bad, you were a big part of my life." He snorted. "You were around more consistently than anyone I traveled with. So yeah, I wanted to thank you. I hope your Pokémon spa works for you. You deserve a second chance."

He ducked his head down a little bit. This shouldn't be so hard. It was just Team Ro—it was just Jessie, James, and Meowth.

"I also wanted to say goodbye properly," he admitted. "I didn't get the chance to at the Tree of Beginning. I—it'd be bad for me to keep coming back here. It would draw attention from the wrong kind of people from both sides of this mess and we all know it." He honestly wanted to give them a chance to talk, but he needed to get everything out now. He took a deep breath and looked up. "I'm glad you guys found something of your own."

James finally broke, tears falling down his cheeks as he lunged forward and hugged Ash tightly. Ash yelped with surprise, as did Pikachu. A moment later, Jessie and Meowth were there too.

They stayed like that for a few moments before Ash pulled away (double-checking to make sure Pikachu was there, just in case). "I have to go deal with the Viridian Gym. I just—I guess – see you." He didn't actually want to say goodbye. It felt too permanent, and who knew if they would pop up in his life in the future. He surely didn't.

"Seeya around, Twerp," Meowth said to him.

"Oh, and take care of the original Twerpette too," Jessie added with a flip of her hair. "Women need to be cherished after all."

Ash snorted. "I will." He turned around to walk out the door.

His hand was pressed against the glass when James said, "Hey, Twerp?"

He turned around to look at them.

"Prepare for trouble."

"And make it double."

Ash and Pikachu both laughed at that.

...

Their small celebration was cut short as a strange noise reached Ash. It wasn't something that he actually ever thought he'd hear.

Red was laughing. Not even just a little bit, nor was it cruel. It was a genuine laugh right from his belly.

The man wiped at his eyes and nodded at Ash. "Since becoming the Kanto Champion, no one has ever beaten five of my Pokémon before. No one has ever had more Pokémon still standing than I have."

Ash could sort of understand in a small scale. Ever since he had defeated Lance, absolutely no one came close to beating him in practice battles, or the couple exhibition ones. It had been a very long time for Red though.

"Now we decide," Red spoke, once again surprising Ash. He held up a Pokéball. "Who has the greater strength. Who has the greater tactics. Who wins. Who loses. Who is the real Master."

"Pika!" Pikachu said, tensing on all fours.

"Come back." Pikachu looked around at Ash as he continued to stare at Red. He could still feel Pikachu's surprise though. "It's okay. Come on."

Reluctantly, Pikachu moved back to Ash's side, looking up at him as he took another Pokéball off of his belt.

Ash had known this was coming as soon as Red had figured out what Pokémon he had with him. What better way to see who was truly stronger?

Two Pokéballs sailed into the air, breaking open and unleashing beams of bright white light. The lights formed into two massive forms with orange scales and flaming tails.

The two Charizard eyed one another, almost identical in every way. Ash could see their different auras to tell them apart, but he also noticed that Red's Charizard had paler scales. He was older. They could use that.

Red suddenly held up his wrist, pushing back the gloves that he was wearing. Ash blinked with surprise when he recognized what was on the Master's wrist. A mega ring like the one he used to own, a keystone glimmering in it, golden light bursting from it.

Ash's eyes shot toward Red's Charizard, locking onto the blue gemstone as light started to surround the Pokémon.

Charizard looked back at him, and Ash's hand went up to his keystone, still in the necklace Tracey had given Misty for the stone after Ash's mega ring had been crushed.

"Fine," Ash muttered as his own keystone began to glow. "If that's the way you want to play." His own Charizard was also surrounded by light.

When the lights faded, the black and orange Charizard snarled at one another. Everything was tense as they simply glared.

The roars that both unleashed seemed to shake the mountain itself, and both Pokémon launched themselves into the air, flying around each other in aggressive circles.

"Wait," Ash mumbled under his breath, pushing the feeling to his Charizard. He knew how impatient his Pokémon could be. "Wait for him first."

Maybe impatience was a Charizard thing, or maybe Red's was just excited to be able to battle, but he lashed out first, blue fire heading towards Ash's Charizard.

The blue flames didn't at all impress Charizard. Sure, this other guy was older and powerful, but that didn't mean all that much. He shot around the fire, aiming his now razor-sharp wings at the opponent. Pride rushed through him as the other Charizard growled and hissed as his own wings took damage.

Ash watched from the ground as the two Pokémon charged at one another over and over again, neither one of them bothering to use their flames, but both resorting to claws and teeth when they got the opportunity.

For a moment, Ash was staring up at a dark sky, watching a Charizard with dark red stripes attack his own. An unsettling feeling rushed through him as he blinked and came back to the present.

It wasn't the same thing. It wasn't.

Ash's Charizard managed to grab a hold of Red's, swinging him down towards the ice. The heat that was coming off of both of the Pokémon had already started melting the ice. Luckily, Charizard X managed to hit the ice and not the water.

"Overheat!" Red called out, and his Charizard X followed his instructions without hesitation.

Ash gasped and covered his face as the Charizard X first melted the flames and then the heat actually evaporated the water, sending steam in all directions.

He was already warm from the stress of battle, but this was far too hot, even at the top of the tallest mountain in Kanto. He shrugged off his warm jacket, leaving it on the ground beside him, and narrowed his eyes at the field. It was hard to see anything.

Of course, it wasn't the first time Red used a trick like this.

Ash closed his eyes and breathed out. He focused on the aura pulsing from the very earth around him, giving him almost an outline of the entire environment on his closed eyelids. He could see Pikachu standing beside him anxiously, he could see Red, completely focused on the Pokémon, and he could see Red's Charizard still standing on the ground, his own Charizard hovering in the air, judging from how calm he was, the steam hadn't reached him.

Red's Charizard was doing something. Ash couldn't actually see it, he could only see aura's energy, but he could see the shift in Charizard X's personal aura. It was charging some kind of other power.

Charizard snorted out through his nose and got an impression of warning and warmth from his trainer. He knew exactly what was coming.

Ash's eyes snapped open. Red and blue fire slammed into one another, painfully hot shockwaves rushing through the arena. Pikachu cried out in alarm and hid behind him, while Ash closed his eyes and held his hat on.

The two Charizard were both in the air again, jets of fire being added to their aerial assaults on one another.

"This isn't proving anything," Ash muttered to himself. He eyed them carefully. They seemed fairly matched in speed and size, so neither of them really had any advantage that way. He thought about their typing as megas, but again, neither truly had an advantage against the other. His Charizard was still fire and flying, while Red's was fire and dragon. Still, the physical hits seemed to be hurting his Charizard more. He thought on that for a moment.

Ash blinked. Dragon. He could use that.

"Oh," he muttered. "Charizard! Hide!"

Charizard managed to swerve out of the way of Charizard X, twisting around and flying away from him. He opened his mouth and unleashed waves of dark fog onto the other one, blocking the view far better than the steam had before.

"That's it," Ash muttered before raising his voice. "Now spin him around!" His nerves were far more frayed than he let on over his bonds with Charizard and Pikachu. Sweat was dripping down his forehead from the heat of the battle. They were so close. So very close. They could do this.

Charizard started flying in rapid circles around the smoke, breathing fire as he soared through the air. He went faster and faster until the smoke was one and Charizard X was trapped inside of a fiery hot, fire tornado.

Ash looked back at Red, and not for the first time, he wondered just how the man was communicating with his Pokémon since he never seemed to say much. He had used a few hand gestures, but some things just didn't add up. He knew Red couldn't manipulate or sense Aura, but perhaps he was still slightly more sensitive to it and had similar bonds? Or perhaps he had simply been training with his Pokémon so long that they knew what was going on.

Whatever Red was planning, Ash didn't want to give him a chance to do it. "He's a dragon-type! You know what to do!"

Charizard absolutely did know what to do with a dragon-type Pokémon. His sharp claws seemed to extend, glowing with a vibrant indigo, and he shot through the spiraling flames. He slammed his fist into Charizard X and was out the other side of the flames before the older Pokémon could react.

Smirking at the roar of pain, Charizard shot back through the flames again and again, coming at it from different directions. The flames were starting to die down though, and Charizard X wasn't just going to take being attacked like that. It wasn't what Charizards did.

He lunged through one more time, roaring as Charizard X grabbed a hold of him. He swung him around and towards the ground, slamming him into the already ruined arena with enough force to

shake the ground.

"You're okay!" Ash called out to Charizard, knowing that he was still conscious. Conscious, but severely miffed. He silently tried to communicate with Charizard to stay there, that it was okay.

Charizard X flew in the air above them in circles like a Mandibuzz. Without much warning, he streaked towards Charizard.

Ash just watched.

"Pikapi," Pikachu said, nudging his leg.

He narrowed his eyes slightly, and Charizard looked over at him.

"Pikapi!" Pikachu cried out in alarm.

"Roll out of the way and grab him!" Ash yelled. He didn't want there to be any confusion on the commands, not this time. He had no idea what kind of strategy Red was trying to use, but knew that if he wanted to win, now wasn't the time to try to be secretive. Now was the time to communicate clearly to the Pokémon that trusted him so much.

Charizard did as he was told, grabbing Charizard X's arm and swinging him down to the ground, using his own momentum against him to slam him into the crater that Charizard had created moments ago.

Charizard X turned his head around to unleash his flames onto Charizard. He roared, but put his foot on the older Charizard's chest to keep him down.

"Earthquake, but keep it right on him and not spread out!" Ash felt the moment Red pieced together exactly what he was doing.

The Master tensed up and actually yelled his next command. "Charizard! Get out of there and take him down."

That wasn't happening. Charizard lifted Charizard X up a bit and slammed him down at the same time he focused his energy into the earth below him. It started to shake and crack, just like with the Pokémon before him that had used it to ruin the arena.

The entire arena shook as the ground underneath the two fire-types shattered, larger chunks of stone flying up in the air around them. Charizard quickly flew up and slammed the stone pillars down onto Charizard X, aiming for his wings to at least keep him grounded.

Ash held his breath when he saw the ruins of Charizard X's wings, grimacing a little bit. No matter the outcome, he was definitely apologizing later on. "Charizard, Dragon Claw!"

Charizard X used his intense flames to try and deter the other Charizard, but at that point, he wasn't backing off. With glowing claws, he cut through the flames.

Ash wasn't sure when he stopped breathing, but he was pretty sure that his heart also stopped beating in the moment that Charizard's attack connected with Charizard X. His friend quickly swerved out of the way, skidding to a stop in front of Ash, still facing his opponent. He was panting, with so many scratches and cuts on his wings and back that it made Ash wince. He was still standing though, and that counted for something.

Ash, Charizard, and Pikachu all turned their attention to the arena.

Charizard X was trying to push himself up off of the ground and Ash was *horrified* by the damage that was done. That gash was bleeding, and it was bleeding badly. He could even feel the worry and slight regret from his own Charizard.

The ground crumbled under Charizard X's hand, and the large creature fell down, reverting back to his normal form as he lost consciousness.

...

"I think a lot about the people that died when Team Rocket took over," Ash admitted. He was actually laying on the couch this time. Pikachu wasn't with him either. "It started with that *stupid* hit list that I was on too. I knew a lot of people on it. Then there was just more and more people dying around me. One of my friends died in my arms. Then Misty almost did the same thing."

He hated to think about it, but he *needed* to. This was all a part of getting better, and that was ultimately what he wanted to do. It was time to tear the band-aid off, even if it would get him upset.

That was why he didn't want Pikachu with him today.

"What do you think about them specifically?" Doctor Sully asked him curiously. "What goes on in your head?"

"I picture them dying," he admitted. "We don't even know how a lot of them died, so my mind makes up the worst things it can."

"And you feel responsible?"

"Yes," he admitted, still staring at the ceiling. There was what looked like a coffee stain up there but he didn't really want to ask how that happened. "I was the one that was supposed to save the world."

"And you did."

"Not to them."

He could see her slowly nodding her head out of the corner of his eye. Instead of a big talk, or something encouraging, she simply said, "Close your eyes."

Ash glanced over at her briefly before doing what his therapist asked of him.

"Good," he heard her say. "Now I want you to picture them. Picture the people you're thinking about."

And he did. He could see Riley, Kidd, Sheena, Kevin, Clair, Agatha, Leaf's mother, and so many others that he knew who had perished. It was like he was walking through Memorial Hall at the Indigo League, looking at their photographs. Then he pictured Ritchie.

"Do you see them?"

"Yes," he choked out.

"Good," she repeated. "Now I want you to picture them as they were when they were alive." That startled him, and he almost opened their lives. "I want you to see them at the happiest they were

that you remember. Can you do that?"

Ash tried, and oddly enough, it wasn't that hard. He could *see* them, all smiles, triumph, and laughter.

"Those are the faces I want you to picture when you think of them. Their ends were tragic, and that will never change. None of it was your fault though. Team Rocket and all the others were the ones that did that. Those that were kidnapped were tragically blind-sided and taken because they *would* have fought against Team Rocket. They would have given their all to defeat them however they could. That is the choice that those who died fighting them made. You can mourn them. You can hate Team Rocket for cutting their lives short, but respect their choices. They chose to fight to make the world a better place." She paused. "Surely you can understand?"

"Why me though?" A much younger Ash Ketchum asked. He shook his head and looked down at his bruised, shaking hands. "Why did you choose me?"

Ash's breath caught in his throat as the memory came back.

"I did not."

His fingers, that had been curled into fists, slowly started to relax and open.

"It is true, the destiny touched you even before you were born, but it does not matter. The closest I can describe for what you are is not a Chosen One, but rather the One Who Chooses. The choices are not easy, and they are rarely ever kind."

Arceus had been right, even back then.

"I don't understand."

"It's the choices you make and the life you lead. It's the friends who believe in you. Your life is yours to live, Ash Ketchum. For what makes you the Chosen One, is you."

Ash's eyes snapped open, and tears streaked down his cheeks. A wet laugh escaped him, and he understood.

"We all made our own choices," Ash muttered. "It wasn't just me. We were *all* the Chosen Ones to save the world in the end, weren't we?"

Doctor Sully didn't answer him, but she didn't have to.

He understood.

...

Red started to say something, but Ash couldn't even hear him. Despite the protest of his aching ribs, and a part of his mind that sounded oddly like Brock reminding him to stick to the rules, he still shot forward.

He skidded to a stop on the ground in front of Red's Charizard, and placed his hand over the wound that was bleeding far too badly. He'd have to praise his Charizard later for his strength, but this was too much. He never wanted to see something like this happen to anyone.

Ash focused on the wound, and the area below his hand started to glow. He was so intently focused on sealing the gaping wound that he didn't even feel his Pokémon coming closer to him,

nor did he feel Red approach.

He slowly removed his hands from the wound. There was still a scar there, but that was okay. At least he wasn't bleeding everywhere anymore.

Ash jumped when a second set of hands rested on the scar, and looked up, a bit stunned to see Red so close to him.

The man – his father – stared at him before looking down at his Charizard. "Thank you." He was smiling, and there was a bittersweet sense of pride rolling off of him. "Congratulations."

"What?"

Red chuckled, bemusement mixing with his emotions. "You won."

"*What?*"

A full-blown laugh escaped Red's lips and a part of Ash had to wonder how long it had been since he laughed like that before today. He looked around at his Pokémon, who were both staring at him with exasperation and pride. "Huh?"

You won. He won. Holy sweet Arceus, he beat Red.

And the first thing he thought to do was make sure that Red's Charizard was okay since it was seriously injured.

Ash laughed, almost hysterically. "I didn't even—I just—I wanted to help him and I didn't even realize—I—wha—" Words were not his friend at the moment.

His whole body jerked as Red reached across Charizard and placed a hand on his shoulder. Ash looked at the hand and then back up at the man before him. Red nodded his head. "That's what let me know that you really *do* deserve this. I fought my hardest, but this day, you were the better trainer." Red nodded, seemingly content with this outcome, despite how he had tried to sabotage Ash in the past. "I see it now. You're what we need. Not me."

Okay, what was with the tears in his own eyes because Ash sure as hell wasn't forgiving Red for everything. He thought about his mother. No, he didn't have to forgive or forget, but he could move on.

Red stood up and returned his Charizard to his Pokéball. He held out a hand to help Ash up. "Congratulations, Inter-Regional Pokémon Master Ketchum."

Holy hell. This was real. It didn't feel real. It felt like he was about to wake up to a broken alarm clock back in his childhood room in Pallet Town. He didn't know when he moved or the tears actually fell down his face, but the next thing he knew, he was both laughing and crying, one arm around Charizard's neck, the other holding Pikachu to him.

Pikachu nuzzled him to the point where it was making a static charge, and Charizard squeezed him so tightly that Ash was sure if his ribs weren't broken before, they were now. He didn't care though. He just hugged them both tightly. Even though Charizard would later deny it, all three of them cried as they laughed.

They weren't the only ones that should be celebrating this victory though. With that thought in mind, Ash looked at Red, who was standing a respectful distance away, giving them their privacy.

"Can I—?" He was so overwhelmed that he couldn't even speak properly, so he motioned to his Pokéballs.

Red nodded his head. "Yes, but come this way." He motioned behind him to the place he had come from. "We should probably inform the other Champions that there's a new Pokémon Master."

A smile spread across Ash's face as the words rushed over him again. A new Pokémon Master. It didn't feel real yet, though he knew it was.

He couldn't wait to tell everyone else.

...

Ash stared down at the rolling hills of Pallet Town. This was where everything had started when he set out to becoming the Pokémon Master nine years ago. Now, there he stood at the edge of the town border, returning as the Master he always said he'd be.

Slowly, he made his way through the trees and the paths, avoiding any of the roads and houses for now. The sun was starting to set anyway, so most people would be at home getting ready for bed. That was just how Pallet Town worked.

He knew that his friends would all be waiting at his home. All of them had gathered there when he left for Mt. Silver in the first place, eagerly waiting to see the outcome of the battle.

As much as Ash wanted to see them and tell them the good news (it really wasn't fair that the Pokémon League got to know first but it did make sense. At least they were keeping it quiet until he told his family on his own), there was somewhere else he had to go first.

The sight of a familiar windmill, Ash sped up. He ducked under the fence and kept going until he saw what he was looking for.

Bulbasaur had been prying two arguing Pokémon (who weren't Ash's in this case) apart before he turned to face them. The Pokémon's eyes went wide, and he could probably feel Ash's excitement. He cried out happily, bounding over into Ash's arms.

Pikachu laughed and latched onto his friend as the Pokéballs on Ash's belt opened. Soon, Ash found himself surrounded by all of his Pokémon. No doubt that had felt his positivity through their bonds and came looking for him.

Ash beamed as he hugged each Pokémon in turn. Some had been with him since the beginning. Some had come back from where they were doing their own thing to help him. It didn't really matter. What mattered was that this victory belonged to all of them. Bulbasaur. Wartortle. Charizard. Pidgeot. Kingler. Muk. Gengar. Snorlax. Lapras. Primeape. Feraligatr. Meganium. Quilava. Donphan. Tyranitar. Heracross. Noctowl. Sceptile. Glalie. Torkoal. Corphish. Swellow. Gliscor. Staraptor. Floatzel. Garchomp. Torterra. Infernape. Emboar. Samurott. Serperior. Leavanny. Unfezant. Krookodile. Seismitoad. Gigalith. Scrafty. Greninja. Talonflame. Noivern. Goodra. Hawlucha. All 30 Tauros. Riolu. Pikachu.

Ash's eyes opened when he felt a strong, but oddly calming breeze blow by. He turned around, and looked up.

He couldn't stop the gasp that rushed out of his lips. The light from the setting sun reflected off of Ho-Oh's wings as the Pokémon flew across the sky.

Ash slowly walked forward until he was standing a few feet in front of his Pokémon, Pikachu just a

little bit behind him. Something sparkling out of the corner of his eye drew his attention away from the legendary Pokémon.

A single rainbow feather fluttered down to the ground, stopping in the grass just in front of him.

With sluggish movements, Ash reached down and grabbed it, turning the feather over in his hand, shimmering in more colours than he could even imagine.

He stared at the feather with the calming presence of his Pokémon behind him. As he twisted it in his fingers, he saw Leaf training with him.

He saw Gary talking excitedly about a new fossil discovery.

He saw Bonnie running with him up a steep hill.

He saw Clemont blowing up a new invention but then starting again with a laugh.

He saw Serena practicing for a Performance.

He saw Cilan throwing on his conductor's hat and telling him new facts about a train that they found.

He saw Iris swinging from tree to tree.

He saw Dawn raising her hand for a high-five.

He saw Max holding up a book with new Pokémon facts to share.

He saw May planning for her next contest while she snacked on noodles.

He saw Tracey excitedly sketching a new Pokémon.

He saw Brock showing off a new Pokémon food recipe he created between study breaks.

He saw Misty laughing as she excitedly dove into the water after a new Pokémon.

"Pikapi?"

Ash looked down at Pikachu. He saw all of his Pokémon standing behind him supportively.

"I'm okay," he said as he wiped away the tears that he didn't know were there.

He turned his attention back towards the sky where Ho-Oh was flying just out of sight, hidden by the rays of the setting sun. A smile spread across his feathers as the breeze picked up.

"The one who chose you, was you."

Ash let the feather go, and watched it fly away into the sky.

-The End-



Chapter End Notes

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Edited by EchidnaPower

End Notes

Welcome back to my world, but probably not in the way anyone expected. Each chapter focuses on a single character, though there is a lot of interaction with others. Each is interwoven with Ash's journey through the Pokemon League. Aside from that, and a few obvious things, this very purposely jumps around in time.

So to anyone reading this, heads up that this will make no sense if you haven't at least read *When The World Ends*. This is fairly unreadable without that since it's all about what they went through during that adventure. That means that some of them are going to be going through some serious stuff. There are mentions to death, suicide, depression, and mental illness in many other forms. Don't be despaired though. I will tell you right up front that this is all about hope and healing.

Please note that this chapter is unedited by a second pair of eyes. I did try myself, but it's hard to catch your own mistakes. My beta is quite busy as of late. If you catch any typos let me know, but please do it respectfully. Thanks!

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